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POSTMODERN LOVE IN THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH IMAGINATION

NEGOTIATING SPACES AND IDENTITIES

Efraim Sicher



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Postmodern Love in the Contemporary Jewish Imagination

Offering a radical critique of contemporary Israeli and diaspora fiction by major writers of the generation after Amos Oz and Philip Roth, this book asks searching questions about identity formation in Jewish spaces in the twenty-first century and posits global, transnational identities instead of the bipolar Israel/diaspora model.

The chapters put into conversation major authors such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Michael Chabon, and Nathan Englander with their Israeli counterparts Zeruya Shalev, Eshkol Nevo, and Etgar Keret and shows that they share common themes and concerns. Read through a postmodern lens, their preoccupation with failed marriage and failed ideals brings to the fore the crises of home, nation, historical destiny, and collective memory in contemporary secular Jewish culture.

At times provocative, at others iconoclastic, this innovative study must be read by anyone concerned with Jewish culture and identity today, whether scholars, students, or the general reader.

Efraim Sicher is a professor of English and comparative literature at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel. In 2020 he was a research fellow at the Israeli Institute of Advanced Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has published widely in modern Jewish studies and has edited the short stories of Isaak Babel in Russian, English, and Hebrew. Among his most recent books are *Babel in Context* (2012); *Under Postcolonial Eyes: Figuring the “Jew” in Contemporary British Writing* (with Linda Weinhouse, 2012); *Race Color Identity: Discourses of the “Jew” in the Twenty-First Century* (as editor, 2013); *The Jew’s Daughter: A Cultural History of a Conversion Narrative* (2017); and *Reenvisioning Jewish Identities: Reflections on Contemporary Culture in Israel and the Diaspora* (2021).

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Efraim Sicher

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Literary criticism risks either partisan misreading or undeserved praise. I trust this critique of contemporary postmodern Israeli and diaspora writing will receive neither. The gloomy, sometimes cynical attitudes in the novels I

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discuss toward sex and marriage, the skepticism toward any stable identity, the solitude in an atomized suburban society all provoke disturbing questions about postmodernism in the Jewish imaginary. It is my ambition that this book will spark a debate about a meaningful future beyond postmodernity. But also hope for love.

Introduction

The New Jews

When was the last time you read a novel with a happy ending? Well, to paraphrase American poet Shel Silverstein, there are no happy endings anymore, certainly not in postmodern literature. And, notwithstanding the humanistic underpinnings of the novel genre and much modern Jewish literature, contemporary Israeli and diaspora novels give a first impression of postmodern preoccupation with depression, drugs, and divorce against the background of detachment, devastation, and death. This book, however, is not about “Jewish” postmodernism or love in Jewish writing as such. Rather, it asks how much the postmodern negation of absolute truths and its view of moral values as constructs of power structures have reinforced loss of faith and loss of identity; how much multiculturalism and globalization have transformed Jewish spaces such as home and homeland; how much existentialist uncertainty and the influence of American postmodern apocalypses (whether of the Pynchon or DeLillo type) weigh in with a post-Holocaust anguish. The preoccupation with sex and death is hardly new in literature, but beyond modernist *ennui* or breakdown and bereavement (to borrow the title of Yosef Haim Brenner’s 1920 Hebrew novel) we see in novels by contemporary Jewish writers a terminal scenario. That preoccupation has repercussions not just for the cultural representation of Jewishness, but also for the future of Jewish culture. Not all is despair, but the redefinition of futurity emerges from a reconfiguration of Jewish identities and renegotiation of Jewish spaces, by which I mean the discursive as well as experiential spaces that construct a sense of identification with Jewishness.

My focus is on twenty-first-century Anglophone prose fiction and recent Hebrew novels that have been translated into English. I do not claim these texts are representative of the variety and vitality of Jewish culture today, and there is certainly much more out there. The contemporary authors I discuss belong to the generation after Philip Roth and Amos Oz, who both passed away in 2018. They do not speak in one voice, but they transform literary traditions, narratives, and tropes in ways that are distinctly postmodern and are symptomatic of the postmodern condition. Postmodern

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love altered the ground rules of personal relations and individual identity in world literature and therefore also transformed the marriage plot. Under the rubric of “postmodern love,” I examine contemporary Jewish writers’ negotiation of identities and identity as such in their postmodernist treatment of nation, ethnicity, gender, religion, and family. The plot revolves around sexual and romantic relations, which shape the construction and deconstruction of identities. Identities may seem empty or floating signifiers in postmodern culture, but the generational positioning of contemporary diaspora and Israeli Jews after the Holocaust negotiates ethnicity, community, nation, and home when all identities are considered performative and no longer contingent on their social construction, when individuals do not necessarily identify themselves with a single collective or with any collective, and when the narratives that formed identity have collapsed or have been compromised. I am asking what is postmodern about these texts, not what makes them “Jewish,” in order to engage with topical issues that have global relevance to our daily lives. The chapters in this book are organized around these issues and proceed chronologically from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present day, from love and marriage to old age and death, and from the legacy of the Holocaust to the search for redemption in this world and in the hereafter. I wish to show how the postmodern treatment of identities and spaces has shifted the narratives of redemption and exile in the work of leading contemporary Jewish writers. The postmodern treatment of these key issues is often unsettling and should spark a debate which, for all the differences between these writers, transcends the geographical borders that divide Israel from America or Europe. In fact, they share surprisingly common themes and concerns when brought into conversation with each other.

Below the radar of media coverage, the patterns of personal and collective Jewish identities are changing rapidly. We will see how contemporary Jewish novelists work through new challenges to Jewish identities and engage with postcolonial discourses, particularly in relation to Israel and Zionism, religious faith, memory, and history. Yet, although the breakdown of marriage and the erosion of the nuclear family weaken the transmission of cultural identity, the increasing interest in genealogical lineage in the post-assimilation generation of the early twenty-first century indicates a desire for continuity from Holocaust survivors to their grandchildren in their love lives and their search for identity, for example, in Nicole Krauss’s *The History of Love* (2005) and Dara Horn’s *In the Image* (2002). In each of these novels, a young woman becomes entangled with traumatic stories of previous generations that bear significance for her own life and beliefs.

“Jewishness” is notoriously difficult to define. The American case exemplifies the difficulty in pinning down Jewish identity to religion, ethnicity, or cultural affinity. Helene Meyers, for example, places the majority of American secular and liberal Jews in a relational position regarding whiteness, religion, and ethnicity.¹ In America there are also what Meyers calls disaffiliated Jews

who opt out “either actively, or by benign neglect.”² Moreover, we need to factor in self-identification as nominal Jews, self-denying Jews, hyphenated Jews, liminal Jews (some by marriage) who declare varying practices of Jewish rituals, Jews solely by origin, and Jews of choice (whether by conversion or repentance). Nadia Beider’s research based on Pew surveys has found that the neat religious/ethnic choice does not hold for a wide range of American Jews, some of whom practice common rituals without feeling commitment, and that there is a range of self-identification from core to fringe, including persons of Jewish background and Jews of no religion.³

Nor does the conventional diaspora understanding of Jewish difference take account of the pluralism of Israeli society, where Jews are a majority but are differentiated by varying combinations of faith, community, and politics. The situation is further complicated by the coexistence of separate citizenship rules and *halakhic* testing in a complex heterogeneous ethnic and religious mix.⁴ Moreover, self-identifying as Jewish around the world is not only a factor of ethnically marked social or religious behavior patterns but also arises from the consciousness of belonging to a people that has survived the Holocaust and is threatened by anti-Semitism.⁵ Holocaust consciousness varies from a defining component of ethnic identity to a shared sense of destiny or collective memory, for example, communal rituals of commemoration or, in the absence of any deep knowledge of Judaism, a kind of “Holocaust religion.”⁶ There are those distant from any observance of Judaism or affinity with other Jews who can say, in the bitter joke repeated by the Holocaust survivor Ilona in Ayelet Waldman’s novel *Love and Treasure* (2014), “it took Hitler to make me a good Jew.”⁷ Then again, fictional representations and performances of passing—as non-Jewish (Tobias Wolff’s novel *Old School*, 2003) or as Black (Sandra Bernhard’s performance *Without You I’m Nothing*, 1990) and Blacks passing as Jews (Philip Roth’s novel *The Human Stain*, 2000)—indicate insecurities in social integration or ultra-sensitivity to outward appearance across the color and class lines as well as comic irony about identity politics. We thus see that, as an ethno-religious category, Jewish identities can often be porous or multiple and defy a simple binary division.

It is all about *feeling* Jewish, explains British literary scholar Devorah Baum, and experiencing a modern sensibility akin to Kafka’s sense of self-alienation, which might not necessarily be shared by all Jews, but which Baum identifies as a feeling that authenticates the self in an Aristotelian sense.⁸ Admittedly, there is in Baum’s attempt to sum up the experience of Jewish difference an acknowledged internalization of stereotypes of Jews as too loud, too sensitive, and too expressive of their feelings, overacting out of insecurity or discomfort. But it is a way of thinking (without claiming to be a definition) about what one shares with other Jews if not religion, ethnicity, or identification with Israel.

It is a formulation which reaches out for autonomy and agency, freeing the individual from imposition of identity from outside or by birth. This is

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to ignore cultural constructions (among other multiple factors of our emotional make-up) that form our identities and influence our social behavior, yet it facilitates a postmodern self-identification of “Jewishness” without having to identify with a Jewish collective and without this affective notion of identity determining a way of life or set of beliefs. One does not, in this way of looking at it, have to be a Jew to feel Jewish. In fact, to steal the legendary advertising slogan for Levy’s Rye, you don’t *have* to be Jewish. This sounds suspiciously close to familiar attempts to universalize Jewishness as exile, as a feeling of alienation and self-estrangement, as Kafka is often cited as saying in his diary on January 8, 1914, “What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe.”⁹ This is often quoted (or misquoted) to support anti-essentialist definitions of “Jewishness” that risk reducing it to a rhetorical sign.¹⁰

In her search for Jewishness in Anglophone diaspora culture, Baum excludes Israel, perhaps because of fear it might politicize Jewishness or compromise her; in any case, Israel is the one place in the world where one does not have to agonize over being Jewish, where one does not, as Baum says she does in Britain, have to feel self-conscious in saying the “J-word” (usually in an undertone) or silently shudder when hearing others say the word.¹¹ By contrast, Jews who feel the need for an outward sign of their Jewishness beyond circumcision or stereotypical physiology tattoo or adorn themselves with Hebrew or other Jewish inscriptions and icons, occasionally humorous or blasphemous, indicate a self-identification of visible difference that requires marking the body after Jews tried so long to erase their difference in order to assimilate.

Another British literary scholar Ruth Gilbert contends that “Jewishness” indicates an identification with being “Jew-ish,” the director Jonathan Miller’s phrase for the marginal zone of disconnectedness from ethnic background, which includes multiple identities—Adam Thirlwell or Will Self, for example, express in their writing the sense of being “half-Jewish” or Jews on the edge. It is a construct which varies from a universal trope for exile and marginality to a casual hybridity and implicitly disqualifies the possibility of an unsplintered whole identity.¹² This existential search for a self is a state of mind, a *not* belonging that some Israelis might share (including a few religious Jews who feel the state of Israel has not yet ended the spiritual exile), yet any degree of belonging to Jewish history necessarily constitutes the self as relating to a larger group, to a common and family past, however little that past is known or understood.

Globalizing the Postmodern Jew

For a long time, we have been used to thinking of Israel and the diaspora as opposite poles, culturally and geographically. Caryn Aviv and David Sheener, in their volume of essays *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora*

(2005), shift the center of Jewish life to America and reconstitute the Jewish diaspora as a collection of persons who reinvent themselves as postmodern secular Jews who are rooted in the places where they live but who perform free-floating identities. Some commentators, like the authors of *New Jews*, are bothered by the idea of Israel as a defining center (or one of the defining centers) of Jewish identity. They would prefer a globalized diversity of Jewish peoples scattered around the world, not rooted in any homeland and unconnected with the state of Israel, with different ways of being and not being Jewish.¹³ There are, in fact, new ways of doing the Jewish thing which do not fit the centering of Jewishness in America and in American Judaism, and which do not relate to Israel and the diaspora as separate or opposed but as locations of a diverse global Jewish culture. This is not about who is a Jew or what Judaism is, but about cultural identities and ways of identifying as Jewish. In the COVID-19 pandemic when synagogues were closed, innovative ways had to be found to define community and affiliation. We should additionally be careful to distinguish between institutional change and rethinking lifestyles or forms of religiosity.¹⁴

In the postcolonial remapping of history, the Jews are both rootless cosmopolitan migrants and privileged White Europeans, whose victimization is turned against them as the cause of violence done to Others. The Jew remains in some postcolonial discourses an ambiguous figure, who sometimes reflects familiar tropes of global power and conspiracy theories, aligned with colonialism, capitalism, and racism. Jewish difference is often perceived as exclusivist in its marriage rules, homophobic, and not open to the culinary or dietary practices of others. There have been frequent calls around Europe to ban circumcision among Jews and Muslims on human rights grounds, and ritual slaughter regularly has animal lovers up in arms (some European courts have upheld legislation against it). Sander Gilman recognizes stereotypes from anti-assimilation debates of the nineteenth century, though the discourse is ostensibly one of multicultural integration.¹⁵ No longer an immigrant group, the Jews are Occidentalized, which does not prevent them also being Orientalized. Kathleen Biddick has shown that the typological representation of the Jews in the supersessionary trend in biblical exegesis in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries in Europe is replicated in an undercurrent of some postcolonial thinking about the Jews¹⁶ who, as resident aliens, have been superseded, in turn, by Third World migrants and refugees.¹⁷

Philip Roth's parodic declaration of the normalcy of the diaspora in *Operation Shylock*, his characteristic doubling and comic mockery as well as his questioning of the authenticity of any identity, including the author's, show how much postmodernism problematizes any definitive statement about Jewishness.¹⁸ Postmodern writers who are Jews and may or may not identify as "Jewish" look through postcolonial eyes at the self, at nationhood, and at the boundaries of ethnic and religious identities. Postcolonial theory has revamped diasporism, which displaces colonialism with new heterogeneous

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communities that grew out of global migration. In Jewish history, the diaspora (*golah*) began as a network of trading posts around the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, well before the destruction of the Second Temple. Only later did the exile (*galut*) become for many Jews normative, although theologically it is understood to be punitive and purgative, to be ended with the restoration of Zion that was prophesied by the Hebrew prophets. However, Stuart Hall, a leading British sociologist of race, has reformulated the post-colonial diaspora, especially relating to the hybrid identity of African Caribbeans, as a metaphorical figure for heterogeneity that rules out the Jewish historical experience as a false “backward-looking” diaspora bound to a sacred homeland that was regained by forcing out Arab Palestinians.¹⁹ In their argument for the normalization of diaspora as a definition of non-territorial Jewish identities in an oppositional model of dynamic transformation of absence and loss of a spiritual center, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin have responded that Hall’s disqualification of the Jewish experience as a paradigm of diaspora eliminates the Jewish diaspora.²⁰ More precisely, postcolonial discourse tends to think of diaspora in terms of transnational hybrid communities of global migration. This displaces the historical understanding of the Jewish diaspora as the dispersion of Jews in the Babylonian captivity and the Roman exile that would end with the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the land of Israel.²¹

Indeed, the Boyarins have insisted on Judaism’s intrinsic extraterritoriality and have invoked forms of radical activism that are assimilable to a human rights agenda and to anti-Zionism.²² In *Parting Ways*, Judith Butler has gone further and demolished altogether the Israel/diaspora dichotomy by delegitimizing the Jewish state for acting contrary to “Jewish values” (defined according to her reading against the grain of Emmanuel Levinas and Primo Levi).²³ But what really is lacking in Butler’s and the Boyarins’ presentation of Zionism as morally compromised by the treatment of Palestinian Arabs is a cogent diasporist model beyond advocacy of anti-essentialist altruistic behavior toward Others. As the political scientist Julie Cooper puts it in her post-Zionist critique, the problem is not that Butler and the Boyarins

censure Israel publicly, endorse binational solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and/or support the BDS movement, but [that] they lack a compelling vision for diasporic politics. Prevailing approaches prove wanting, I argue, because they contest Zionism on the terrain of Jewish identity. To loosen Zionism’s hold on Jewish allegiance, Butler and the Boyarins recover alternative approaches to the attainment or grounding of identity, approaches they consider likely to inspire ethical conduct toward non-Jews. Butler and the Boyarins invest political energy in these projects because they understand Zionism as more than a political movement for the establishment of a Jewish state. Zionism also, on their view, advances a philosophically naïve and morally

reprehensible theory of Jewish identity. If Zionism's political failings are inextricably bound up with its theoretical failings, then one can gain traction against Zionism, Butler and the Boyarins suggest, by defining "Jewishness" otherwise. If, however, the demand for a Jewish state rests not on a philosophical mistake about the boundaries of the self, but on a historical, political, and economic analysis of anti-Semitism, then Butler and the Boyarins attack the wrong target.²⁴

Butler says that she does not wish to be represented by Israel, but her manipulative rhetoric is based on fallacious assumptions (as if anyone is forcing on her the right to become an Israeli citizen or to identify with its government's policies). Butler bases her construction of Jewish identity negatively on her claim that Israel's existence affects her in ways she feels morally bound *as a Jew* to resist. Such delegitimization of a Jewish sovereign state that no longer functions primarily as a refuge for a persecuted people chimes in with post-colonial discourses of hybridity, globalism, and migration, but also fits the pattern of Americanization of Jewish writers from Emma Lazarus to Philip Roth.²⁵ The divide between Israel and the diaspora risks not so much the creation of two separate forms of "Jewishness," as in the dystopian fantasy I will discuss in Chapter 5 that only American Jewry will survive, but, more significantly, it infers the recognition of homeland as a global state of mind which erases Jewish difference because *everyone* is different.

Postcolonial discourses have replaced the notion of homeland in the nation-state polity with a nomadism that updates Jewish wandering to a heterogeneous community of global humanity, but one that forever mourns the loss of an originary and unrecoverable homeland. Deleuze and Guattari have identified nomadism, which they distinguish from transnational migration, as an ancient model of social organization which characterizes a trend in human history toward deterritorialization. For nomads, the land is the ground on which they stand, unlike sedentary settlement we associate with the city-state or modern nation. Their wandering is not linear but rhizomoid, lacking boundaries or a fixed home, like plants that have no roots in the soil but thrive on nonlinear, horizontal relations.²⁶ We will see examples of the turn to such exilic nomadism in the works of both Israeli and American writers.

As a form of transit or transition between places and cultures, Jewish diaspora wandering across languages, borders, and cultures seems at first glance an inviting paradigm for the ambiguities that have been created by globalization. This fits in with what Homi Bhabha has defined in his attempt to reexamine the writing of history and culture from the margins, from the new diaspora perspective, and to transform the temporal narrative of European modernity as the location of culture into a narrative of the gathering of scattered migrants around a metaphorical imagined community—in his phrase, "Dissemi-Nation."²⁷ In a transnational migration of peoples and persons, cultural value is located in a hybrid state, the "transnational as

translational,” as Bhabha puts it. In that sense, postcolonialism has anticipated the problematics of the postmodern challenge to linear narratives, agency, discursive closure, and determinacy of meaning.²⁸

The notion of a global Jewishness resists previous Eurocentric paradigms of identity. Radical Jewish voices in Latin America read Memmi and Levinas in the ruins of the bombed-out Jewish community center in Buenos Aires and realign themselves with a Global South, an alternate Third World space in which they challenge the assimilation of Jews to Western civilization in the face of the new post-9/11 barbarism and reread both Jewish persecution and postcolonial theory from an alternate north-south epistemology.²⁹ The usual east-west axis (a modern European invention) takes no notice of Jewish migrations over the centuries across oceans and continents, from Spain to India, from Portugal to Brazil, from Baghdad to China. The world Jewish map needs to be adjusted to take account of globalized diverse and mobile communities, whether the Port Jews of Dubai, Warsaw, Shanghai, and Bangkok or cosmopolitan Jews who have for personal reasons moved around the world. The east-west paradigm, moreover, ignores the emerging Jewish and neo-Judaic communities in Uganda, Madagascar, Nigeria, and elsewhere. These and other demographic and ideational shifts raise questions of how we define Jews and Judaism and what constitutes “Jewish” revival.³⁰ Once more, identity proves liquid and shifting and can move in different directions, from the countercultural or oppositional to returning to faith or conversion to Judaism. In the postmodern deconstruction of conventional or established patterns of identification, multiple possibilities pan out for forms of Jewish life within a global multiculturalism characterized by transnational overlapping of borders and boundaries.

These global shifts are reflected within Israel itself. Home to over 46% of the world’s Jewish population, Israel has strengthened its ties with the historical past, no longer cut off from the history of exile, and has redeemed that history with the ingathering of the exiles and celebration of the cultures they bring with them. Israel’s mosaic has become more, rather than less multiethnic and fragmented. The last decades have seen not just mass immigration to Israel from Russia, Ukraine, France, and Ethiopia, but also the arrival and conversion of “returning” Jews from Portugal and Latin America (descendants of *conversos* fleeing the Inquisition) as well as from Poland (descendants of Jews who hid as Aryans in the Holocaust) and the lost tribe of Bnei Menashe, who are returning from northeast India to their ancestral lands in Samaria. An estimated one million Russian-speaking Jews in Israel often express ambiguous feelings about their identity, and some feel part of a Russian diaspora as a secular Russian Israeli minority that celebrates “novyi god” (the Soviet-style Russian new year), or still harbors the wish to bequeath Pushkin and Russian culture to their Israeli-born children, despite being largely well integrated in the Israeli middle class. Some Jews from the former Soviet Union returned to the religion of their ancestors and rejected the identity imposed by a totalitarian regime, whereas some of the

second-generation Russian Israelis have expressed their hybridity in identification with marginalized *mizrahi* Jews or with Levantine or Mediterranean popular culture. Meanwhile, the assumption that Israel is a European country is weakening as Israel, a bridge between east and west, between Africa, Asia, and Europe, turns east in a strategic realignment with the Gulf states and in economic ties with China and Southeast Asia.

In fact, besides some movement of Jews from the former Soviet Union and from Israel to Germany, the map of world Jewry is becoming decreasingly Eurocentric. Outside Germany, Jewish communities across Europe are declining and dwindling. Yet, despite the common perception of separate communities, the diaspora is now recognized in the roots of Israeli culture³¹ while Israel remains in one way or other important in the make-up of Jewish identities abroad. The picture of a disaffiliated American Jewry alienated from Israel in the novels I discuss does not quite match the results of the Pew survey of American Jewry in 2013, which found that despite reservations about Israeli settlement policies and a widening gulf between Israel and American Jewish leaders, 70% of respondents felt some affiliation with Israel, a figure that remained unchanged since 2000–01 (the time of the Second Intifada), while 43% said that Israel was, in some way or another, part of their sense of Jewishness. However, only 12% of nonreligious Jews felt strong attachment to Israel (compared with 36% of religious Jews), while 55% felt no attachment (compared with 23% of religious Jews).³² A similar picture emerges in Britain, where Jews have been prominent in the protest movement on behalf of Palestinian Arabs, yet the majority of the Jewish community stands by Israel's existence as a Jewish state.³³ When Jews are attacked on the streets of London and New York by pro-Palestinian mobs (as they were in May 2021), it does not help to say "Israel has nothing to do with me."

As for diaspora cultural identity, America is no longer the melting pot that transformed immigrants from the Old World into Americans. Contemporary American Jews feel comfortable (though not always nowadays safe) and do not always identify with the traditional narrative of exile from an ancient homeland as a punitive and transitory condition. Indeed, if American Jews yearn for a lost homeland, it is the largely imagined *yiddishkeit* of Eastern Europe destroyed in the Holocaust, even if they can taste it only in lox and bagel with *heimish* pickles,³⁴ notwithstanding the valiant efforts of YIVO, the National Yiddish Book Center, and other organizations to sustain Jewish culture in the diaspora, where levels of Jewish cultural literacy remain low. But let us not forget that American Jews participate in the multiculturalism debate not only as Jews. In feminism, gay rights, and anti-racism, they sometimes prefer not to state their subject position because they are identified under erasure as "Whites" or accused of usurping a victimhood not their own; indeed, they have been ousted as "Zionists" for displaying their Star of David. Naomi Seidman comments that when Jews come out as Jews in advocacy for universal causes, they risk political tagging, or else their

“Jewishness” is a sort of drag, like a Purim costume, which does not necessarily reflect the complexity of who or what they are but reflects a postmodern fracturing of identities.³⁵

Jews Writing World Literature

Both Israeli and American Jewish authors have long ceased viewing themselves solely within the confines of their ethnicity or citizenship and have won recognition as international writers with global concerns. This calls for a global and transnational reconceptualization of Jewish culture in different languages. This book therefore departs from the usual readings of Jewish writers on the basis of their biological or ethnic identity and reads them in a transnational perspective. Dan Miron has described the relation of Jewish literatures to each other as contiguity rather than as continuity divided by national and geographic borders.³⁶ Other scholars too have begun to see the benefit of reading Jewish texts as world literature. Lital Levy and Allison Schachter have urged us to think of transnational world literature not just as the global connections of a metropolitan network of texts in English, but as the circulation and translation of modern secularized and secularizing texts in minor languages such as Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, or Judeo-Arabic, which they see as a “microcosm of world literature in its local and global iterations.”³⁷ Literary modernism was a case in point for the mobility of polylingual Jewish cultural centers and cross-fertilization of texts in the early twentieth century, and postmodernism is no less a global phenomenon. Saul Noam Zaritt’s project to remap Jewish American literature in a multilingual global network of texts rethinks modern Jewish writing in English or Yiddish in terms of readerships and writing practices in the world at large, though his examples of Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer restrict the discussion to the United States.³⁸ Israeli writers have long evaded the limits of national institutions and local readerships; they write outside Israel and still win prestigious national book prizes. Ruby Namdar, winner of the Sapir Prize, lives and writes in New York. Ayelet Tsabari, an Israeli short story writer of Yemenite descent, writes in English in Canada and writes in her memoir *The Art of Leaving* (2019) that she has many homes, but paradoxically it is leaving that defines what home is:

Leaving is the only thing I know how to do. That seemed to be the one stable thing in my life, the ritual of picking up, throwing out or giving away the little I have, packing and taking off. That was what home had become for me.³⁹

Such cultural nomadism is not new if one thinks of Hebrew writers in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, the location of the writing self in an international or transnational space has become a universal convention.

There is, in fact, a strong case to be made for reading Israeli and Jewish American writers as world literature. Etgar Keret, Ayelet Gundar-Goshen, Eshkol Nevo, Dror Mishani, and Moshe Sakal are only the latest Israeli writers widely translated for an international audience. American Jewish authors write from hotel rooms in Tel Aviv (as Nicole Krauss does) and are quickly translated into Hebrew.⁴⁰ Moreover, language in the global village no longer automatically attaches the writer to a homeland, and identities are contested or negotiated outside territorial borders in what Bhabha called in *The Location of Culture* a “third space,” which has no here or there.⁴¹ Instead of defining Jewish authors solely with reference to their biological or ethnic identity, Benjamin Schreier grounds Jewish American literary history in an identity-in-the-making in texts.⁴² It is not my task to categorize modern Jewish culture, least of all Jewish American literature, and my reading of the postmodern Jewish imaginary refuses to ghettoize writers but treats them as global authors who have earned their place in world literature by virtue of their talent and importance and not because of a “Jewishness” determined by birth or by dint of a National Jewish Book Award. In any case, contemporary literature has moved on from a group or collective identity to a postmodern concept of the individual as a nomad or migrant in an atomized society, with all that implies for personal relationships.

There is no denying the “Jewish interest” of Nicole Krauss and Jonathan Safran Foer or the issues of Jewish identities and Israel in their work, but they do not necessarily write “as Jews” and follow much broader literary traditions and universal concerns. All too often, contemporary Jewish writers are tagged as “Jewish” on the basis of their ethnic origin and without regard for the concerns and themes of their writing, often to the neglect of meaningful evaluation of their contribution to world literature. Nicole, the writer figure in Krauss’s *Forest Dark* (2017), describes her horror and discomfort at being pinioned to the “Jewish author” label. As we will see, the Nicole character feels trapped by the attempt to foist on her responsibility for Jewish literature, yet she lets herself be kidnapped to fill Kafka’s shoes and dons his coat. This double bind is hardly new, nor is a writer figure or the *mise-en-abyme* of a novel-in-a-novel device that creates ambivalence in the writer’s affinity with Jews or with canonical literary traditions as well as complicating the relations between fiction and reality. But the anxiety of influence goes beyond the kind of slavish idolatry Ozick describes in *Art and Ardor* or the fetish Roth portrays in *The Ghost Writer*. It touches on the postmodern dissolution of the subject and the writer’s failure to escape history.

Postmodernity/Postmodernism

The disappointment in love in the novels of Krauss and Foer is not incompatible with hope. Yet it is a hope tinged by a general awareness of the postmodern condition which has been overshadowed by cataclysmic destruction. Similarly, the postmodernist short stories of urban despair and

failed romance of Etgar Keret, who emerged in the early 1990s as a leading Israeli short-story writer and enjoys an unflagging popularity around the world, leave the reader with a sense of amoral non-commitment, of detachment from failed ideologies and the established political order.⁴³ Keret's narrator looks at the human situation from a great height after being shot from a cannon, in the opening story of Keret's collection *Takalah biktse hagalaksiya* (2018; *Fly Already*, 2019). This is a despondent view of someone whose wife left him and who literally missed the target in life, but who enjoys the detachment of his unique observation point.⁴⁴ In a humorous sense of the absurd, familiar from James Thurber and Ephraim Kishon, in Keret's *Tsinorot* (Pipelines, 1992) and *Ga'aguay lekisinger* (1994; *Missing Kissinger*, 2007), the reality of a country under constant attack and the ironies of love and sex are stripped bare without any attachment to ideological or ethnic discourses. The popularity of Keret around the world attests to the recognition of these basic human situations.

The paradox of postmodernism, Vincent Brook complains, is that it denies categories, including its own, and that in its collapse of totalizing theories, it undermines any attempt to theorize what is postmodern about contemporary Jewish culture; it would be better, he concludes, to ask what is postmodernist about postmodernism.⁴⁵ Trying to understand what Jewish identity meant to him as a non-Jew, philosopher Bernard Harrison concluded that the "identity of any man or woman is, after all, or often is, a palimpsest composed of fragmentary memories, imprints, of those he or she has loved."⁴⁶ If Jewishness is about collective memory and identity, about shared values and traditions, then postmodern Jewishness sounds like an oxymoron in postmodernity, which insists on individuality as the hub of personal growth and the self as a floating signifier that is not permeable to determination.⁴⁷

Jean-François Lyotard has told us that postmodernism is a condition of knowledge in which the old master narratives have been unmasked as unreliable and bolstering colonial ideologies; there is no longer a linear progression of history, but a fallout into the uncertainty of multiple possibilities in an existential unknown. For Lyotard, the "postmodern condition" was at the heart of what he called the "crisis of narrative." The crisis evidently results from the attempt of modern science to legitimate itself in a meta-discourse that relies on master narratives "such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth."⁴⁸ The use of metanarrative to legitimate knowledge, Lyotard argues, raises questions regarding the validity of social institutions and the rules governing social relations. For postmodern Jewish writers, the metanarrative in question is above all the core narrative of Jewish literature and history, exile and return.

By "postmodern" I mean not only the post-Holocaust era and the inauguration of a new sensibility that the old assumptions about humanity and humanism no longer held, when history itself was no longer understood in

the same way (though one could also say that postmodernism rereads modernism and that the work of French deconstructionists such as Derrida and Lyotard himself has its antecedents in modern philosophy). Postmodernism is both a chronological and ontological caesura marked by the revelation of the Nazi concentration camps. The Holocaust was the fissure that divided modernity from postmodernity, destroying the philosophical foundations of Enlightenment thought, an earthquake, as Lyotard once put it, in which the instruments of measurement were themselves destroyed.⁴⁹

Yet there is a further sense of a break in postmodernist literature from what went before. In 1959, Irving Howe described what he termed in scare quotes the “postmodern” American novel after World War Two as having abandoned any assumptions about society in an atomized middle-class America that was fulfilling its sleep, not its dream.⁵⁰ Saul Bellow characterized postwar writing in America in a 1963 essay as fixated on loss of self; he read Philip Roth’s *Letting Go* as showing how compliance with bourgeois rules of sociability and private happiness could hide below the surface subversive dissatisfaction of the individual.⁵¹ Looking back, Ihab Hassan understood that an ontological break lay behind Leslie Fiedler’s notion of pop culture’s reaction to high modernism and Hassan’s own sense of immanence and indeterminacy in the unmaking of self.⁵² Brian McHale puts this discernment succinctly when he avers that “postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues.”⁵³ That is to say, postmodernism is conscious of more than its temporal posteriority in its recall of what it comes after. Similarly, in postmodernist architecture the juxtaposition of different historical styles both displays what postmodernism comes after and undermines it. How postmodernism rereads the past in the present in a subversive, oppositional, and ironic mode constructs and deconstructs, parodies and re-valuates in an intertextual web of quotations. The aesthetic rejection of modernism was not simply *post*modernism, but also a transformation of the novel into a form of entertainment that questions its own ontology, undermining the status of fiction and the illusion of truth. “Postmodern love” is therefore about the dissolution of the marriage plot of romance as a literary genre, it is about multiple, fluid gender and sexual identities, and it is about imagining alternate spaces. It is about subverting the traditions on which it draws.

Postmodernism has been eulogized as defunct or as pointless and we are told to expect new developments at any moment, from hyperrealism, digital culture, and cyber reality to post-postmodernism, the post-human, and post-truth, all with their agendas and inbuilt obsolescence. The post-postmodernist or metamodernist “New Sincerity” (a term coined by David Foster Wallace) attempts to fill the cynical void resulting from the post-modernist deconstruction of bourgeois capitalism as well as its abandonment of truth and meaning as illusions in order to create some semblance of community and social order.⁵⁴ Yet, as Theo D’haen contends, this does

not mean that there is no more postmodernist writing; we are still living in a postmodern society.⁵⁵ Postmodernism cannot be undone, and we cannot ignore its impact on the way Jews think about who they are whether in Israel, Europe, or America.

Amir Eshel assures us that “futurity” is about finding a language to create possibilities and offers a hermeneutics that engages actively with the moral implications of the past.⁵⁶ While my differences from Eshel’s basic premise will become evident, I agree with his prognosis that the liquidation of “futurity” in some postmodern thinkers (such as Badiou and Jameson) is unfounded; postmodern debunking of history and the collapse of master narratives do not necessarily cancel out conceptualization of a future.⁵⁷ “We live in the postmodern world,” the Czech leader and playwright Václav Havel reminds us, “where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain.”⁵⁸ The problem is when a post-apocalyptic worldview rules out the continuity of collective identity or possibilities of redemption. I will come back to options of *tikkun* or cosmic repair in the Coda which concludes this book, but the creation of fictional worlds should itself hold out hope that a fatal reality has not closed in around us and that there are options for altering the ending of the story, even if it will not necessarily be a happy one or even known to us.

Renegotiating Jewish Spaces and Identities

Identities are grounded in spaces, whether geographical or metaphysical, and needless to say, postmodern constructions of space have far-reaching implications for Jewish identities. Beginning with Lefebvre’s attention to *éspace vécu* and Foucault’s insistence on the spatiality rather than temporality of power structures, the spatial turn in sociology has spread to Jewish studies and has transformed our understanding of what we mean by “Jewish spaces.” Barbara E. Mann, in her seminal study *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (2012), understands the creation and performance of Jewish spaces as the interactive and interacting practices of languages, genders, and ethnicity, whether in diasporas or in Israel, where diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural identities come into contact.⁵⁹

In her readings of medieval and modern Hebrew literature, Mann shows the complex ways in which place constitutes Jewish space, but also how loss or absence of place can create meaningful spatial identities. In its general terms, if not in its details, Mann’s approach is useful in conceptualizing Jewish spaces (in the plural) which construct meaningful boundaries that define “home,” “homeland,” or sacred space as “Jewish” without excluding multiple or diverse meanings, which can occasionally be fragmented or conflicted. Decolonization or de-historicization of space removes the dichotomies of homeland/exile, Israel/diaspora, self/Other, which become fuzzy in several of the texts discussed in this book.⁶⁰ The destruction of the Temple, the nation’s central sacral site, dictated an exilic form of ritual and prayer

and created a volatile geopolitical disputed territory on the ground as well as a transcendent place in Jewish thought and in ideological discourses. The Temple is situated in a physical space, governed by minutiae of regulations and restrictions, yet as *makom* (the “place” in Genesis 28:11 where Jacob encountered God) it houses the Divine Presence which is beyond space and time but dwells within the Jewish people, the defining space for Jacob on his travels and later for his descendants⁶¹ as well as in the Jewish people’s wandering through the desert, a space of revelation, which (in traditional exegesis) does not contradict desire for the Land, as the novelists discussed in Chapter 6 suggest. In the postcolonial desecration of religious space, however, *makom* is deterritorialized into a universal abstraction that is not tied to any one people or land.

Some dissidents and discontents in the Bible wanted on several occasions to go back to Egypt, but the biblical narrative insists that these rebels were betraying the beliefs and ideology of the trajectory out of slavery to the Promised Land which was part of the covenant with the Patriarchs. That trajectory led through the desert, which is both the site of revelation (*midbar*, a place of Divine speech) and ownerless (*hefker*). For Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of Jewish Modern Orthodoxy in nineteenth-century Frankfurt, the desert is therefore a space for testing faith and identity in an age of emancipation and material wealth as well as a space for putting into practice the universal peace foretold by the Hebrew prophets. Yet, for some contemporary thinkers who follow Levinas and Blanchot, it is a metaphor for Jewish exile and nomadism, for rootlessness, placelessness, and deterritorialization.⁶²

A flexible concept that has been used to describe postmodern experience of Jewish spaces is the *‘eruv*. The *‘eruv* (a wire stretched over poles to create a private domain) defines the *halakhic* boundaries of movement on the Sabbath and has created territories in contemporary European and North American cities, which complicate the demographic and cultural lines between Jewish and non-Jewish populations.⁶³ The *‘eruv* is a symbolic boundary, not a physical border of separation like Israel’s security fence or ghetto walls, and it has been held up as an example of the porous boundaries of an urban transnational Jewishness which inspires artists to reconceptualize the meaning of “Jewish” space.⁶⁴ We will also see other ambivalent constructions of the relations between self and the collective, such as the *boydem* (attic), which contains memories of the past in stored objects and holds secret knowledge that constructs and deconstructs identities.

The spatial turn in Jewish Studies from the 1980s has opened up thinking about the cultural topography of the interaction of Jews with urban areas in pre-modern, modern, and postmodern periods, particularly in central and eastern Europe after 1989, where their absence has been memorialized in various ways that engage with former or erased Jewish sites such as synagogues, homes, and institutions now put to other uses.⁶⁵ Postmodern views of Jewish spaces tend to look at how boundaries are perceived and how they

form multiple or fluid identities through the experiential and representational narratives of everyday living.⁶⁶ This means that the stories we tell about our sense of “Jewish spaces” are more important than the identities imposed by collective bodies or organizations, but also that the transgression of boundaries impacts the marking and containment of ethnicity. In her book *Place and Identity in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (2011), Karen Grumberg construes place as a subversive construction in a political landscape, undermining the expected linking of Zionist ideology with the Land of Israel.⁶⁷ As we will see, that linkage has snapped, and the sacred texts which mapped the topography and the history of the nation are subverted to question individual identity, gender roles, and sexuality (though it must be said that ambivalence in relations of writers with the Land of Israel goes back a long way).⁶⁸

I would go further and argue that the “spatial turn” in Jewish studies allows us to think through the redefinition of spaces as “Jewish” unhinged from the time-space coordinates of Jewish history, as they are constructed in the familiar narratives of exile and redemption. Those narratives of exile and redemption structure a collective understanding of the biblical story of God’s promise to Abraham that after exile the Jews would be restored to the Land of Israel. That pattern of exile and redemption explained the theodicy behind the destruction of both Temples and the ensuing exiles central to Jewish liturgical and poetic traditions in their development from destruction to Yavneh (where rabbinical Judaism was reestablished), from Masada (the last stand in the revolt against the Romans and the archetype of martyrdom through the ages) to rebirth.⁶⁹ Going beyond lived or “social” space, the postmodern worldview of destruction without end, of an exilic nomadism, defies any redemptive resolution and is always on the move, a mobile and transient spatial identity like the *sukkah*.

However much modernist and contemporary Jewish writers have disengaged from the return to the Land or express ambivalence toward it, they are nonetheless working, subversively or in counter-narratives, within this spatial *topos* underlying the foundational texts of modern Hebrew literature which shaped the imagined space of early Zionist texts in the twentieth century.⁷⁰ Adia Mendelson-Maoz observes that for such writers as David Grossman and Orly Castel-Bloom, the establishment of Israel as the home of the Jewish people has not made them feel at home because its borders are not secure and include what they regard as the Palestinian Arab homeland. They see the beleaguered tiny state of Israel marked off by the armistice lines of 1949, in which they grew up, as a normative space and the post-1967 borders as dangerous or messianic. Palestinian Arab militants and some Israeli intellectuals believe that all of Israel is disputed territory. This ideological reading of the abnormality of Israeli space, closed in by checkpoints and security walls, partly explains the preoccupation of some contemporary Hebrew writers with the moral complexities of Israeli military rule and the fight against terrorism which, Maoz-Mendelson concludes (following Deleuze and Guattari), results in deterritorialization.⁷¹

My concern is broader, extending to the postmodern Jewish imaginary at large, where the deconstruction of home and homeland tests the existential basis of identity and the validity of the narrative of exile and redemption. The revision or rejection of the narratives of exile and redemption, central to traditional Jewish faith and secular Zionist ideologies, challenged the binding covenant with Abraham and the Binding of Isaac (the *'aqeda*), which define the nation from the Exodus through the Destruction of the Temple to the founding of the State of Israel. Israeli novelists Meir Shalev and A. B. Yehoshua read this foundational myth out of time and place, as Jews who have contracted out of the biblical covenant and who secularized the Bible's stories for postmodern readers. For them, God is a human invention and the religious message of the Binding of Isaac is dubious, thus placing in doubt Israel's moral claims to the Land when nation and religion are connected, because it burdens every generation with the prospect of sacrifice for the nation. As the Israeli poet Haim Goury said of his generation, they were "born / with a knife in their hearts."⁷² The postmodernist subversion of the covenantal narrative deconstructs mythical structures that form Jewish identities but does not, however, preclude a secular transformation of covenantal ties.⁷³ These texts engage with contemporary discourses of global migration, hybridity, and multiculturalism rather than Jewish literary and religious paradigms, which are often ignored, dismissed, or, more often, treated ironically. Inevitably, this tends to divert any genuine philosophical dialogue and to bypass the canonical redemptive narratives in favor of a desolate post-apocalyptic vision. For the generation after Oz and Roth, the postmodern discrediting of core narratives of personal and collective identity leaves in abeyance the possibility of talking about history, while neo-liberal economic policies and the impasse in the peace process make a subject position all the more difficult to maintain.

Playing (Un)happy Families

I shall begin with a historical overview of how postmodern love transformed the genre of the novel and impacted the representation of sex. I will compare postmodern love in recent work by Jewish American authors, such as Nicole Krauss, with their Israeli counterparts, such as Zeruya Shalev, showing how contemporary Jewish authors abandon the conventional love plot for a graphic description of marital breakdown and unsatisfactory relationships. The disappointment in *eros* throws the self back into a search for identity and meaning in a chaotic void in which neither nation nor faith provides compass points for orientation. To rephrase Tolstoy's opening lines of *Anna Karenina*, happy families are happy in their own ways; unhappy families are unhappy in similar ways. It is a sign of the times that dysfunctional families and troubled personal relationships determine how the individual relates to the collective and the nation. That synecdoche holds for much of the fiction analyzed in this book.

The next chapter, “From Auschwitz to Yavneh,” takes up the legacy of a traumatic history in Krauss’s two novels *The History of Love and Great House* and Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Everything Is Illuminated* and shows how mourning and melancholia shape the transmission of collective and personal loss. The destruction of the Temple gave rise to an alternate Jewish space, “Yavneh,” originally a rabbinical academy that reconstituted the religious and legislative fulcrum of the Jewish people and which was transformed during the long centuries of exilic wandering into an idea on which Jewish learning and culture were founded. “Yavneh” has been much used and misused and figures as a trope for exile and catastrophe as defining events that nevertheless leave hope for love. Whether the narrative of exile is redemptive is ambiguous and uncertain in Krauss and Foer, but we will see larger ramifications of this question in the intertextual relationship of David Grossman, Cynthia Ozick, Foer, and Krauss with the Polish Jewish writer and artist Bruno Schulz.

The book proceeds from the aftermath of destruction in collective and personal memory to the trope of body and nation that sets up an analogy for the tensions between loyalty to Israel and betrayal in love for an Arab. In “sleeping with the enemy” stories, the tangled relations of Jews and Arabs play out the trauma of living in a state of siege or in constant danger of terrorist attack while trying to imagine the Other as an object of desire, but also as a bridge across contested narratives of identity. Here the borders of self/nation have opened space for the Other, who is both enemy and double. The dream of sharing the same space, of cohabiting, despite the violence of the partition which has divided the lovers, cannot be realized and the lovers remain locked in mortal but passionate struggle for possession of the Land and of the national narrative. I close the chapter with some examples from recent Jewish American fiction that align sex and history, love and politics, showing complex and sometimes ambivalent attitudes toward the state of Israel.

Feminism has been without doubt a liberating experience for Jewish women around the world, and many broke out of the insularity of the middle-class Jewish home or cast off religious rules that regulated their dress and behavior. This is the subject of “off-the-*derekh*” memoirs and novels that give an intimate exposure of growing up in religious homes and discovering sexuality and romance. But little attention has been paid to the journey in the opposite direction, back to Judaism. I will explore the work of Israeli and American Jewish women novelists who offer spiritual biographies of *ba'alot teshuvah* (female penitents) and do not shy away from frank discussion of sex and sexuality in stories of love and desire. Unlike conventional conversion narratives, these journeys in search of faith lead to unexpected and unknown destinations.

The feeling of being stuck in relationships and in life that recurs time and again in the writing of Orly Castel-Bloom, David Grossman, or Etgar Keret is hardly unique. However, Israel’s ongoing security situation (commonly

referred to as *hamatsav*) and the impasse in the Israel-Arab conflict represent what Elana Gomel and Vered Karti Shemtov have called a “limbotopia,” which can be found in much postmodern post-apocalyptic fiction. This is neither utopia nor dystopia, but an unending no end to the end of history.⁷⁴ We will see in Chapter 5 the implications of that exit-less present for the impossibility of a redemptive narrative in the breakdown of relationships between couples, but also with the state of Israel. The “destruction of Israel” plot resists the redemptive narrative of the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem in antiquity, as formulated in rabbinical Judaism and in secular Zionism. Instead, it follows the logic of a *necessary destruction* that arises from critiques of Zionist ideology and imagines a scenario of a second Holocaust that predicts a post-apocalyptic vision of the future. Why both Israeli and American Jewish novelists seem surprisingly preoccupied with the destruction of Israel is a question I will ask in examples from novels by Nava Semel, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Eshkol Nevo. It is a question that addresses the conceptualization of history when all meta-narratives have collapsed, including the Zionist explanation for the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel and the establishment of the state.⁷⁵

The preoccupation with the destruction of Israel cannot be understood, however, outside a dystopian view of postmodern love, in a breakdown of marital relations and of home that mirrors the loss of idealism and loss of love in post-Zionist perspectives and in the aging of the lovers in the story. I therefore conclude with recent novels that take a retrospective view of post-modern love from middle age or dying. It is quite remarkable how novelists reaching middle age reflect on love and death from the vantage point of bereavement or senility and reassess love and sex as loss and pain by adopting the memories of the elderly to cast doubt on life’s joys. The loosening of the bonds of love for a partner and for the Land of Israel requires reconsideration of personal and collective identities. I will again bring Nicole Krauss and Zeruya Shalev into conversation, this time in meditations on aging and dying, and I will invite Michael Chabon and Ofir Touché Gafra to join them in considering love seen from a deathbed and the afterlife. The disbelief in the afterlife leaves us with the remains of love and the question of what happens to identity when life is constructed out of loss and separation, grief and sadness, divorce and death.

We are left with the question of the future of Jewish identities and the future of secular Jewish culture. The moral impasse and existential void that became noticeable following World War Two challenged attempts to find meaning or purpose in life. It is not that an existentialist position sees no meaning in life, but that meaning is open to multiple interpretations and variations. There can be no conclusion in a discussion of postmodernism. Instead, in the book’s coda, I will turn to the concerns over the crisis of postmodernity voiced by the prominent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and eminent Jewish thinkers such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, J. B. Soloveitchik, Abraham Isaac Kook, and Shagar.

The theme running through these texts is love or the failure of love, and it plays out irresolvable issues of self and identity. This book might have been called (after Leslie Fiedler) *Love and Death in the Jewish Novel*, except that I read the Jewish imaginary in its transnational perspective and regard the legacy of the literary romance in Western and Jewish literatures as subverted by postmodernism. Postmodern love tells us as much about the breakdown in human communication as about the breakdown in the narrative of ethnic and religious as well as national identities. It brings to the fore the difficulty in finding meaning in ideals, in ideologies, in relationships.... We are thrown back to familiar paradigms of loss and yearning, to familiar fixations on death and mourning in a shallow, superficial commodity culture that respects neither age nor books. Admittedly, the ambiguities and ironies of postmodernist fiction do not exactly promise a serious philosophical treatise. But neither do the postmodern novels discussed in this book promise certainty, let alone answers.

Notes

- 1 Helene Meyers, *Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 3–5. See also Charles E. Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: Summit Books, 1985).
- 2 Meyers, *Identity Papers*, 3.
- 3 Nadia Beider, unpublished paper, “Liminal but Not Always Minimal—Religious Identity and Commitment among Jews Not by Religion in America,” World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, August 6, 2017. See also Nadia Beider, “Religious Practices and Beliefs among Religious Stayers and Religious Switchers in Israeli Judaism,” *Sociology of Religion* 78, no. 1 (March 2017): 81–99.
- 4 See Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Judith Bokser Liwerant, and Yosef Gorny, eds., *Reconsidering Israel-Diaspora Relations* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2014).
- 5 See Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 119–20; Michael Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive?: Looking Past the Holocaust toward a Jewish Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 6 I am using this term loosely to describe different ways some Jews (and non-Jews) regard the Holocaust as something sacred and make it central to their religious or philosophical outlook. The term has been used more controversially in Adi Ophir’s 1987 essay “On Sanctifying the Holocaust An Anti-Theological Treatise” to refer to an actual religion with a vengeful god ruling over absolute evil, a jealous god that does not allow reverence of any genocide or catastrophe other than the Holocaust, whose name must not be taken in vain; reprinted in *Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust*, ed. Shelley Hornstein, Laura Levitt, and Laurence J. Silberstein (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 195–204.
- 7 Ayelet Waldman, *Love and Treasure* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2014), 131.
- 8 Devorah Baum, *Feeling Jewish (a Book for Just about Anyone)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 1–4.
- 9 Kafka, *Diaries*, vol. 2, 1914–23, ed. Max Brod (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), 11. Yet, Kafka’s answer to his question is far from simple, as Vivian Liska

- points out in *When Kafka Says We: Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 1–2.
- 10 Cynthia Baker, *Jew* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 47–96.
 - 11 Baum, *Feeling Jewish*, 16–18. On the J-Word see Efraim Sicher, *Reenvisioning Jewish Identities: Reflections on Contemporary Culture in Israel and the Diaspora* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2021), 70–78 and see pp. 123–26 below.
 - 12 Ruth Gilbert, “‘Genes, Shmenes’: Jew-ish Identities in Contemporary British Jewish Writing.” *European Judaism* 47, no. 2 (Autumn 2014): 12–20.
 - 13 Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
 - 14 See, for example, Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Terry Bookman, *Beyond Survival: How Judaism Can Thrive in the 21st Century* (Lanham, MD: Littlefield and Rowman, 2019); on New Age Judaism in Israel, see Rachel Werczberger, *Jews in the Age of Authenticity: Jewish Spiritual Renewal in Israel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017).
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1 All You Need Is Love?

Romancing Marriage

Before embarking on a discussion in this chapter of how erotic love shaped modern and postmodern Jewish novels, I want to briefly consider the transformation of the marriage plot, beginning with romantic and *maskilic* responses and changes in Jewish social life in Eastern Europe and in America. The secular religion of love shaped the modern novel, which viewed romantic love as the objective of life.¹ In fact, as Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz argues, romantic love, in its connection of the private sphere of emotions with the public sphere of politics and economics, brought out the contradictions of capitalism. Instead of exchange on the basis of self-interest and mutual economic benefit, erotic relationships were based on individual empathy and irrational passion, which undermined the social order. Yet by the twentieth century, courtship in European societies was devolving from a regulatory practice to attraction based on natural feeling.² Romantic love was elevated to iconic status in late capitalism, marketed as a cultural commodity that blurred dream and reality in its unattainable ideals.³ The eroticized images of women in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* come across today as stale in a world where love is commodified and marketed in novels and films; Erich Segal's 1970 *Love Story* is just one example of a modern commercialized version of the Romeo and Juliet plot, which we will meet in stories of love across faith and ethnicity in Chapter 3, but which do not work out in postmodern novels.

The marriage plot in the nineteenth-century Jewish novel played out pressures to conform to communal models of endogamy and bourgeois domesticity. German Jewish author Fanny Lewald's novel *Jenny* (1843) showed romance thriving among thoroughly assimilated German Jews, but warned that conversion and intermarriage did not lead to a happy ending. In the 1850s, German Jewish authors tried their hand, without spectacular success, at writing romances for a Jewish public that was avidly reading the *Bildungsroman* as well as Eugène Sue and Alexander Dumas. They used the conventions of middlebrow fiction in an attempt to win their readers' hearts over to Judaism, with little criticism of the promise that marriage within the faith secured eternal love and ensured bourgeois domesticity, although

they accommodated such new ideas of marriage as love and companionship.⁴ In Britain, too, Grace Anguilar and other middle-class Jewesses were writing their own literary romances to counter the missionary narrative of Christian-Jewish love in conversion novels and were domesticating desire to conform to current ideas of a woman's domestic virtue and duty.⁵

Naomi Seidman has related the changes in courtship and marriage patterns among east European Jews to secularization and modernization, under the influence of the erotic love that replaced the marriage plot in romantic novels and poetry.⁶ As Seidman shows, *Haskalah* novels, beginning with Abraham Mapu's *Ahavat Tsion* (1853; *The Love of Zion*, 2006), which reworked the love of Amnon and Tamar in biblical Hebrew against the setting of ancient Israel, adopted the conventions of romantic literature but voiced present-day concerns about the role of love in marriage in the critique of traditional Jewish society.⁷ Sholom Aleichem's Tevye stands bewildered at the loves of "modern children," yet matchmaking did not (and does not to this day) necessarily rule out romantic attachments which fitted in with communal conventions and social expectations. The majority clung to their traditional way of life in the *shtetlekh* of the Pale of Settlement until they were torn from it by emigration to the United States, the communist revolution, and the Holocaust. The Jewish religion in the meantime gradually came to an accommodation with modernity in a range of responses (from Moses Mendelssohn or Reform Judaism to the Modern Orthodoxy of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch). It was, as Seidman emphasizes, a gradual process of transformation rather than rupture.⁸ The point nevertheless remains valid that east and central European Jews were discovering modern love in secular literature, particularly German romantic poetry, which was highly prized as a mark of humanist culture and offered alternate models of romantic relationships.⁹

In America, where Jews immigrated *en masse* after 1881, there was nothing to stop Jews participating and themselves promoting the American way of life. Seidman puts it in terms of falling in love with the American concept of romantic love as the "embodiment of the political-erotic freedoms" of their new country, in which they were equal, consensual citizens.¹⁰ Indeed, Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* (1908) gave the name to the aspiration for integration of the teeming masses of newcomers and performed the ideal union of Jew and Christian, who put behind them ancestral enmities and prejudices in romantic love.¹¹ In Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), these immigrants shed their distinctive east European Jewish dress, their beards, and wigs and abandoned the religious restrictions that hindered their full assimilation. Yekl/Jake also abandoned his wife for a more modern woman. Cahan's column *Bintel Brif* in the socialist *Forverts*, for example, aired issues of sexuality and romantic love that revealed the inroads of Western secular values. Yet, in reality intermarriage rates at this time were quite low and the bulk of the Yiddish-speaking immigrants did not so quickly forget all their traditions. The mass immigration

to America of young singles nevertheless changed perceptions of love and marriage, and the traditional patterns of courtship, often through the mediation of a matchmaker, yielded to the pressures of American life and the drive for financial stability and for upward social mobility.¹² The challenge of love in secular America is reflected in the popular “Tagebukh fun an alter medl, oder der kamf kegen freye libe” (“Diary of a Lonely Girl, or the Struggle against Free Love”) by Miriam Karpilove, a frank discussion of female sexuality which ran in the New York Yiddish newspaper *Varhayt* in 1916 and 1917 before coming out in book form. These are the woes of modern love which pitted the temptations of sexual desire against financial stability and family life, but also set the risks of being left an Old Maid against the prospect of an unhappy marriage.

Secularization certainly did not begin in godless America, but by the 1920s, Jews were encountering sex in American popular culture.¹³ The New Woman and the flapper helped change ideas about sexuality against the background of improvement in women’s legal and socioeconomic status which allowed them more independence and social mobility. Let us not forget that Sigmund Freud and modern psychology altered understanding of sexuality, and sexuality became increasingly central to personal identity, consequently also to fiction. Modernist representations of the erotic drive in the human psyche varied from the religious truth released by the sexual instinct in D. H. Lawrence to the erotic charge sex has for Henry Miller.¹⁴ By the end of the twentieth century, the discourse about love that centered on the heart and revolved around morals and virtue turned into a discourse about sexuality, centered on the genitalia and geared to desire.

Despite a conservative social norm and strict obscenity laws, sex was plainly visible in American culture in the early twentieth century. When Sholem Asch’s *Got fun nekome* (*God of Vengeance*) was performed on Broadway in 1925, the director and actors were indicted for obscenity. Although perhaps not typical of Jewish American immigrant women writers, a thoroughly modern sexuality is embraced in Anzia Yezierska’s *Salome of the Tenements* (1925), where the female protagonist runs after a handsome Gentile whom she marries—not happily, it turns out. Even more explicit than her contemporaries writing in Warsaw or New York, Celia Dropkin shocked New York with her erotic Yiddish love poetry.¹⁵ In fact, although Polish rabbis bemoaned the dangers of Sabbath desecration and profanity in secular America, east European Jewish culture was no less attuned to the erotic appeal of modernism, whether in Bergelson’s Yiddish, Bruno Schulz’s Polish, or Isaak Babel’s Russian. Yisroel Rabon’s *Der gas* (1928; *The Street*, 1985) illustrates the raw sensuality and despair characteristic of the interwar years when sex and sexuality were openly discussed by sexologists and on the pages of the Polish-language Jewish women’s magazine *Ewa: Tygodnik*. Before he came to the United States in 1935, Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote sentimental pulp fiction (*shund*) in the Warsaw press as well as translating erotic novels and modernist classics; after the Holocaust, he used

graphic eroticism to explore demonic forces as a response to the evil that had engulfed east European Jewry, though he remained ambivalent about the source of creativity and sexuality in the *sitra akhra*.¹⁶

For American Jews, the availability of sexual partners from other ethnic groups, in particular the socioeconomic pull beyond the restrictions of the Jewish home, accentuated the wish to efface outsider status in White America and deepened the estrangement from Judaism. In the postmodern age, however, there is hardly any need to convert or disguise one's Jewishness to integrate into Western society. Civic rights for American and European Jews are today ensured and taken for granted. Jewish difference itself can be interesting, exotic, even sexy...which partly explains why intermarriage rates are at an all-time high outside Israel.¹⁷ After the Holocaust, intermarriage was seen as an assurance that racism was a thing of the past, but also that Jews had put their particularism and exclusivity behind them, an ambiguous attitude that finds the Jews' opposition to marrying Gentiles unacceptable in a liberal democratic society.¹⁸

The unspoken (and occasionally spoken) message is that we all need to get over outdated religious bigotry. Indeed, *omnia vincit amor* beckons Jews to overcome all exclusionary practices or ethnic and religious barriers and join humanity in bed. The Romeo and Juliet plot of romantic comedies drives home the message that once Cupid has shot his bow, ethnic, religious, and blood ties cannot part lovers. This is a familiar story, from the assimilationist message of early cinema's *Romance of a Jewess* (USA, 1908) and the comic plot of Irish-Jewish romance in *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922) and its film adaptations through the CBS sitcom series *Bridget Loves Bernie* (1972) or the Charlton Comics' title *Just Married* (1973–74). Recent multicultural versions include *Love Is Thicker Than Water* (UK, 2016), in which a Welsh student and a Jewess find love despite different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and Maxime Giroux's film *Félix and Meira* (Canada, 2014), in which, against the background of Montreal's culture wars, a devout Hasidic woman leaves her community in an adulterous affair with a French Canadian single man who has had a difficult relationship with his family, again persuading us that love bridges the cultural, ethnic, and religious divide (though only when Meira takes off her modest clothing and at the price of the destruction of her marriage).¹⁹ This supposedly liberating message that interfaith relationships overcome ethnic and religious difference conforms to the standard narrative in popular culture that sex brings freedom and fulfillment. We are supposed to agree that freedom is having fun, and if one is not having fun, then one is somehow not free. As G. K. Chesterton famously remarked on the new amorality, "free love" is a contradiction in terms.²⁰ In his novel *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1979), the Czech writer Milan Kundera satirized the absurdity of free love, which, like the ideals of Christianity and communism, left its adherents disillusioned and betrayed. When a woman suggests a threesome, it turns out to be a manipulative, grueling

experience that leaves the man feeling humiliated; at the end of the novel, the lovers are still waiting for transcendence beyond the border. But then Kundera mocked Annie Leclerc's celebration of a woman's *jouissance* (in her manifesto of feminist writing, *Parole de femme*, 1976), which might, he joked, just as well include the delight of defecation and death.²¹

Postmodern literature records the disappointment of the illusory promise of ecstasy and eternal bliss in the new civic religion of love, which is more often than not a sexual affair, a ritual of dating and copulating that is not usually intended to lead to marriage (indeed, commitment seems to be a phobia of the postmodern couples in popular fiction and on the screen). Free love all too often means drifting from place to place, the sexualization of body parts, the assessment of physical performance by both sexes, and the cheerless free-fall out of love.²² Postmodern love can be characterized in various ways: Madonna's performance of a sadomasochistic cross-gender fantasy of erotic desire for a stranger in *Justify My Love* (2009) or Stanley Kubrick's undressing of social niceties in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). In Don DeLillo's satire of postmodern America, *White Noise* (1985), making love is described as "entering" a woman, who has sold her body to obtain pills which will defer the fear of death. Martin Amis, in a reversal of narrative chronology, showed love in *Time's Arrow* (1991) to be a series of bitter reproaches that lead to happy partings in the life of a Nazi perpetrator whose cruel experiments for Mengele differ only in style from the cynical amorality of postmodern America. True, Jonathan Franzen's acutely observed study of middle-class domesticity in contemporary America, *Freedom* (2010), ends with reconciliation and moving on. Yet, more often postmodern love follows a trajectory of lovers meeting in hotel rooms, as in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), where a couple become sucked into obsessive fantasies and violence that end in a gruesome, unromantic death in Venice.

The marriage plot, so central to the modern novel, has died because the institutions of marriage which contained and policed unruly passions have been outdated by a culture of promiscuity. Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina paid a heavy price for extra-marital sex. But then passion leaves much to be desired: in *Madame Bovary*, Emma discovered only too late the bitter truth that her lover's indifference was less concealed the more her ardor became apparent. If we were wondering when we last read a novel in which the heroes fell in love, married, and lived happily ever after, we are misremembering the Victorian novel. The postmodern novel starts with marriage that implodes, leaving the couple reexamining their emotional attachments, as in Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) set in the American South, the story of a newlywed couple ripped apart by the husband's wrongful imprisonment. In Jeffery Eugenides's metafictional novel *The Marriage Plot* (2011), which Seidman borrows for the title of her book, Madeleine chooses for the topic of her honors thesis the marriage plot in the English novel. Neither literature nor literary theory helps solve her

romantic difficulties. Her love troubles begin in the theory course when deconstruction deconstructs love.²³ Then, she discovers in the aged Professor Saunders's seminar on the marriage plot in the nineteenth-century novel that

In the days when success in life had depended on marriage, and marriage had depended on money, novelists had a subject to write about. The great epics sang of war, the novel of marriage. Sexual equality, good for women, had been bad for the novel. And divorce had undone it completely.²⁴

Jews Writing Sex

If Jews are still reading love stories, it is not for the marriage plot, but for the romantic and erotic interest in a libidinal economy where amorous relationships do not necessarily lead to marriage or commitment and where religious and ethnic difference is perceived as no impediment to passion. In Rebecca Goldstein's *The Mind-Body Problem* (1983), after Renee becomes privy to "the overwhelming power and mystery of what lay beyond" dating and courtship, she confesses:

And now I had passed through to that great knowledge, and this was the reality. It was horrible. (How many other mysteries would end this way, were one finally to see through them? How desirable is the parting of the mists?)²⁵

Her honeymoon in Rome with Noam is a lesson in reality, like Dorothea's honeymoon in the same city with Edward Casaubon, except that where George Eliot inferred, Goldstein spells out:

What tied me to my body was not so much its desires as the desires it aroused in others—the more (both desire and others), the better. Through it (my matter, so to speak) I mattered to others, and thus mattered. Through it I had mattered to Noam, who himself mattered so much, at least from where I stood. But it occurred to me in Rome, where Noam's sexual aloofness seemed to increase, that his interest in me was inconsistent with his general indifference to people, himself included, or so he claimed.²⁶

This is where postmodern love sheds any idealization of the fusion of one soul in another. Renee believes a woman's power lay in her control as a *femme fatale* over men's bodies. Realizing she does not really matter to her husband, a Princeton professor and a mathematical genius, she decides to start an adulterous affair. But she is pulled apart by the mind-body problem and is unable to resolve the contradiction between her sinfulness and her

former religious beliefs. After explaining to her friend Ava what it was like to feel “kosher” after dipping in a *mikveh* (ritual bath), she lets her lover Dan penetrate her while menstruating and feels cleansed because erotic ecstasy wipes away guilt and disgust. The sense of transgression in the breaking of the ritual purity laws feeds Renee’s need to know what it is like to cross the boundaries and explore forbidden sexual experience. However, the body in itself does not satisfy her; she is particularly annoyed Dan wants to write down their bedroom dates in his diary, as if they are business appointments. This is not just a feminist issue of the mind-body dichotomy being identified with Judaism (as is commonly claimed) or the identification of the academic world with male privilege, where women cannot be both brainy and sexy (as Ava claims in the novel). When Renee wants to leave her husband and run away with Dan, her lover explains he cannot offer more than passion. Reconciled with her husband, Renee has to find a balance between mind and body, the supernatural and the mortal.²⁷

Of course, the oversexed Jew is something of a cliché in novels by Mordecai Richler, Leonard Cohen, or Philip Roth. Time and again in Roth’s fiction, body wins out against mind, the id rules the Yid. Zuckerman’s sex mania is fed by women ready to satisfy his misogynist fantasies, but not to settle down with him; in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) he is amazed to discover contemporary women habitually carry around sex toys and lubricants in their handbags. And yet a circumcised Jew cannot simply walk unimpeded into the erotic paradise of America. We are told in *The Counterlife* (1986) that the pastoral ended with the final barrier to full assimilation, circumcision, by means of which Zuckerman bonds with his son in a covenantal “us.” At the end of the novel, however, he asks his wife what she thought when she first felt in her hand his circumcised erection, telling her that there are lives to be dreamed before one finds the “real” life. In Roth’s novels (as in much contemporary popular culture), when sex has been divorced from marriage and marriage often ends in divorce, sex is what makes a man masculine and American. In his introduction to his collection of erotic stories by Jewish authors, *Neurotica* (1999), Melvin Bukiet tries to convince us that Jews craved love amid poverty in east European fiction even before they discovered sex in America. For Bukiet, it is simply a matter of being alive and being stereotypically hypersexual, though David Biale suspects that it has to do more with the push to assimilate into Gentile society.²⁸ Sexual excess as a characteristic of Jewishness, it has been argued, is a marker of difference among acculturated Jews that points to their underlying sense of insecurity, the sort of neurosis we recognize in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977).²⁹

The counterculture that emerged from the beat generation, whose icon was Allen Ginsberg, a Jew who left his parochial Yiddish-speaking communist family, preached universal freedom and love. The “summer of love” in 1967 promised a sexual utopia which established sexual freedom as a *raison d’être*. In Erica Jong’s zipless version in *Fear of Flying* (1973), the rare

encounter between a man and a woman with no strings attached looked like an ideal of a perfect sexual ecstasy:

It was a Platonic ideal. Zipless because when you came together zippers fell away like rose petals, underwear blew off in one breath like dandelion fluff. Tongues intertwined and turned liquid. Your whole soul flowed out through your tongue and into the mouth of your lover.³⁰

Jong's fictional *alter ego* Isadora Wing seemed at the time to embody the feminist revolution. But it was Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), to which Jong was partly responding, that made erotic writing Jewish. Yet few writers have taken heed of Jong's warning that such fantasies of guiltless, anonymous, uncommitted sexual relations usually turn out to be brief, bland, and ultimately unworkable.

We do not have to agree with Natalie's bleak conclusion in Ayelet Waldman's *Love and Treasure* that all relationships follow the rule of the "extra one third": that however long it lasts, the last third of a relationship is always loveless. This dire lesson stems from a post-Holocaust despair that it is hopeless to mend marriages or the world, as Andrew Winer suggests in his novel *The Marriage Artist* (2010), which opens with the double suicide of art critic Daniel Lichtmann's wife Alexandra and her lover Benjamin Wind, whom Daniel had brought to fame. Winer invites us to fall back on the religious and aesthetic wisdom of Josef Pick's grandfather, a scribe who wrote *ketubot* (marriage contracts) back in Vienna in 1928. Grandfather Pomeranz, the embarrassing Ostjude, tells Josef that "Love may be pure, but marriage is not"; in other words, marriage, particularly the unhappy marriage of Josef's parents, is filled with calculations and knowledge of the spouse's flaws.³¹ The boy tries to repair the gulf between his parents by painting a *ketubah*, but only succeeds in reminding his mother of the fake sham of her marriage, while his father recognizes the hollowness of his performance of an assimilated convert who repudiates anything Jewish. Josef's parents are not saved by converting to Catholicism and changing their name. As it happens, the *ketubah* was not effective in saving marriages, despite the magic realism of Josef's art, which sought to bring partners closer, and Josef came to believe nothing could be mended in a world in which "there was no mending anyone."³²

After the Anschluss and Kristallnacht, the only way for Josef to get out of Austria is a marriage of convenience to someone with an entry permit to British Mandate Palestine, which, given his skepticism about Zionism, suits his ideal of a utilitarian loveless marriage perfectly. Once he vowed, together with his bosom friend Max Wiener, never to marry, and now the Zionist Max throws him together with Hannah Engländer, who possesses the coveted immigration permit and shares his philosophy of loveless marriage. This perfunctory union is precipitated by a Gestapo officer who declares Hannah to be a whore. After they are married in the registry office, she asks

Josef to have intercourse with her as he would use whores, wishing to be nothing and nobody. Many years later, she believes she achieves wholeness by becoming nothing in a nunnery. Yet she realizes at the time that she does need him in this complicated poisoned sadomasochistic, love-hate relationship and that his primal need for her body, his adoration of her genitalia (he uses a cruder word), was what kept them together. It's a cruel, flawed understanding of human relations, which strips what this couple knows about marriage, literally, down to a naked view of life as suffering and pain.

In the parallel plot, at the end of the twentieth century, Daniel divorces his childless wife and marries the voluptuous Alexandra, a stereotypical Russian Jewess with whom he is having an adulterous affair. The officiating rabbi quotes Kierkegaard to evoke the partnership of God in marriage, but this marriage too ends tragically and childless when Alexandra tells him he loves her too disinterestedly. In fact, in a generational repetition of Austrian Jewish assimilation before the Holocaust, Alexandra's lover Benjamin Wind turns out to be the grandson of Max Wiener, Josef's lover from Vienna (the author's own name, Winer, suggests a working through here of personal identity conflicts). Benjamin was brought up estranged from Jews and Judaism and believes he is the son of Native Americans. His father Hermann, a rationalist atheist scientist, simply erased anything from the Jewish past, indeed erased the past, including any attachment to his son Benjamin. To Hermann's rationalistic mind, only the present and the material world have any meaning, and he practices Zen Buddhist meditation in order to focus on the present moment. Daniel suspects his charade of descent from Black-foot Indians goes further than Jewish aspirations to assimilation in its claim for indigeneity,³³ which is a claim to victimhood not his own. We discover just how damaged Hermann is by his traumatic experiences as a Holocaust child survivor, pursued by fear of falling (one of the leitmotifs of the novel), unaware that his mother saved his life when she dropped him from the train to Auschwitz. Later, Max and Hannah snatched him from his adoptive loving Polish parents, and, though they were two broken Holocaust survivors, brought him up in America. Hermann, not unlike his true father Josef, is "the atheist of love" (as his ex-wife Francine called him)³⁴ and only believes in sex, feeling no love as he walks out coldly on his wife and child for another woman.

This calculated misogynist nihilism in fact saves Hannah from a brutal rape when Josef unleashes an extraordinary and obscene speech about his whore-wife to the two SS officers who intervened in their public brawl, but which signs his own fate, to be shipped to Birkenau. There again, the self-proclaimed "marriage artist" produces the *ketubot* that cost him his life when they are discovered. These clandestine and subversive *ketubot* (including the *ketubah* that he previously refused to grant Hannah) close the novel with a grotesque litany of names of couples who could be joined only in fantasy. The unsubtle theme of this tale of repetitive confusion of love objects and of women who fall for unhappy men who cannot satisfy them is that

marriage is a “thin tissue of error and illusion”³⁵ and may be incompatible with love. However, in the end Daniel marries Max’s personal assistant Carmen who is with child by him, thus forming a vicarious connection with the Josef-Max-Hannah triangle that leaves some hope for satisfaction in marriage. Yet, Daniel will always be haunted by the ghosts of past loves and by the collective Jewish past, just as you cannot erase your family, your own past, and live (as Wind thought he could) only in the present. The rejection of heterosexual marriage that we see in Max’s “marriage” to Josef is paralleled by the rejection of religion in Josef’s abandonment of the lucrative marriage contract trade for erotic painting. At the same time, Winer’s tale of a sadomasochistic marriage in Vienna is reminiscent of David Vogel’s *Khayei nisuim* (1929; *Married Life*, 1989), about the disastrous relationship of a Jewish intellectual with an Austrian baroness and with Viennese anti-Semitism, which reminds us that romance is not always rosy in the modern Hebrew novel.

Making Love in Hebrew

Modern Hebrew love stories can be unsettling, riven with the existential angst of a nation under siege, as in A. B. Yehoshua’s *Shloshah yamim veyeled* (1965; *Three Days and a Child*, 1970) or Amos Oz’s *Mikhael sheli* (1968; *My Michael*, 2005). After the Lebanon Wars and the Second Intifada, the disillusion with idealism and the breakdown in the grand historical narratives of Zionism, there emerged a genre of Israeli fiction which turned inwards to the individual and to detachment from a consumer society given over to Western materialism. Love created a refuge from conflict, a space of romantic possibilities, but sometimes unrequited love also reflected larger frustration and estrangement. Leafing through Gershon Shaked’s compilation of contemporary Hebrew writing, *(Re)writing Love in Postmodern Times* (2005), one wonders what has become of the love poetry of the middle ages or, for all his ubiquitous influence on modern Hebrew fiction, the magic, mystical, and sublime moments of richly illusive intertextuality in Agnon’s love stories. As Shaked explains, the former conflicts between tradition and individual desire or the trope in Zionist discourse of love for the Land of Israel (as in Mapu’s novel *Love of Zion*) have given way to a postmodern love that could happen anywhere in the world and that is overshadowed by conflicts between parents and children, a love which is torn apart by anger and jealousy, a troubled and unstable love that leaves scars.³⁶

Writing love stories in Hebrew necessarily engages with the language of the Bible, but also grapples with the national legacy of collectivism as well as with the traumatic aftereffects of war and terrorist violence. Zeruya Shalev’s *Khayei ahavah* (1997; *Love Life*, 2001) was a *succès de scandale* and was compared to the writing of Ronit Matalon, Orly Castel-Bloom, and Shulamit Lapid. This was because of its blunt refusal to serve as a vehicle for ideological messages and because of its crude description of sex in the language of

the Bible. Abroad (where its eroticism did not shock anyone), the novel was compared to *Lolita*, *Story of O*, *Tropic of Cancer*, or *American Psycho*, and was hailed as a victory for women's emancipation.³⁷ What was so appealing was the transgressiveness of a woman's explicit description of sex, her abandonment of marriage and family, and the apparent irrelevance of Israel's political storms or its current security situation. Yet the greatest shock came not so much from the female narrator's uninhibited lack of any respect for social conventions as from her disregard of the risks she took which undermined her independence and freedom. Rose Levinson reads this novel as an allegory of the collapse of the Zionist myth of the new muscular Jews, who were urged to reach a new physical harmony between their bodies and the Land of Israel.³⁸ But it can equally be read as a satire of feminist liberation gone sour.

Ya'ara literally unbuttons the mystery of love in her intimate monologue of adultery with an older man, Arye Even, a father surrogate with whom she re-enacts her mother's love affair of many years ago. After seducing him and borrowing the name and role of the biblical Avishag, she finds herself in bed with him and another friend of her father's. Later, she gets him to invite her to his bedroom:

I began to pull down his trousers with a new boldness, stemming perhaps from my resignation to his lack of love for me, and I even said to myself this is true love, that I was learning to love without expecting anything in return, and I looked at his body in underpants and under-shirt surrounded by smooth olive skin, and thought that soon it would be mine, in a minute it would be mine, and I stroked him on top of his underwear, I always preferred to stroke on top of clothing, it seemed safer to me, I kissed his underpants until I heard him say, I have to be alone now, Ya'ara.³⁹

Here and throughout the novel, Ya'ara ignores the signals of rejection and abandonment. Instead, Ya'ara lets herself be sucked into kinky sex, which turns out to be far less arousing than thinking about doing it. In her submissive performance of pornographic scenarios, she compares herself to a mannequin or an actress and cannot stop letting herself be victimized. She descends into a cycle of destructive, masochistic behavior. Liberation of her body turns into female grotesque, a painful exhibitionism of insatiable desire as she gradually loses control and renounces free will, as in Dahlia Ravikovitch's classic poem about recovery from a nervous breakdown and the emptiness of women's lives, "Buba memukhenet" ("Clockwork Doll," 1959). Ya'ara deludes herself that she has the power of divine creation when she licks her lover from toe to head in order to stick the pieces together, reminding us of the fragmented bodies in Orly Castel-Bloom's novel of female grotesque *Dolly City* (1992), to which I will return in Chapter 3. She feels powerful only when high on drugs. At the crucial moment, however, the man takes control and throws ice (quite literally) on the fire burning between

her thighs. In Yigal Schwartz's reading, Ya'ara's shrill confession of deceit and lies plays out a parody of Freud's study of female hysteria in "Dora" or a study of waking from frigidity in the legend of Sleeping Beauty.⁴⁰ Yet this story of a frustrated woman falling for an older man, familiar from the love triangle in Agnon's *Bidmi yameha* (1923; *In the Prime of Her Life*, newly translated 2014), is turned round to a female perspective of the paradoxical double bind of dependence on male dominance, without which her desire cannot be satisfied. As Yael Halevi-Wise has demonstrated, the love relationships in this novel replicate a pattern of triangular love affairs over two generations in much modern Hebrew literature, following the biblical model of Abraham's love for Sarah and Hagar, repeated a generation later in Jacob's love for Rachel and his marriage to Leah.⁴¹

In this feminist insight into the paradoxes of women's liberation, Zeruya Shalev presents a no-win dilemma of postmodern marriage. Unable to decide about going with her husband Yoni to Istanbul on a second honeymoon, the impetuous and impulsive Na'ama searches Yoni's body like the shelves in the closet (after failing to hand him a towel when he stepped out the shower), as if she can fill the emptiness of their relationship:

I began at the bottom, with his big flat feet, and above them his surprisingly slender ankles, only now did I sorrowfully note their fragility, and rising from them white legs growing thicker, with dark hairs, with pink knees, soft thighs, broad hips, and between the thighs sparse black hair, flabby testicles, and a pink, slightly lopsided penis, and then the high waist with a drooping little pouch, pale chest and slightly sagging shoulders, leading to broad, tanned arms, as if they had been stuck onto the white body in an expert collage, looking like particularly successful prostheses, imitations that were superior to the original, and I always liked to imagine them holding our baby.⁴²

This is where everything comes apart, like the imagined prostheses stuck to Yoni's body. There is no intimacy here, only loneliness in simulacra of love and compulsively faking it in routine sexual procedures. Driven almost crazy by her sexual hunger and obsessed by an incestuous fantasy, Ya'ara turns to Arye, who is in mourning for his dead wife. She is locked in the bedroom, like a captive in a harem, and locked into an emotional trap (not dissimilar from Renee's in *The Mind-Body Problem*). After her husband fails to recognize her waiting for him at the airport, she escapes the mess she has made of her marriage by going back to her thesis at the university. The topic of the thesis, legends of the destruction of the Temple, provides the sacrilegious intertext of her adulterous affair. She remembers a legend told to her by her mother that rates sexual transgressions as a sin for which it is better to die rather than commit them.⁴³ Her distortion of Jewish tradition closes the novel with a sad ending to Ya'ara's story, with a metatextual story of apostasy and death.

The portrait of postmodern marriage in Zeruya Shalev's *Ba'al veishah* (2000; *Husband and Wife*, 2001) is no less despondent. As we will see, it is at once a candid portrait of postmodern marriage and a parable of no less unbearable bonds with the Land of Israel. Na'ama's husband Udi often leaves her on her own when he goes off on nature treks; he is the hardened Sabra who connects with the Land from which she feels alienated. She has forgotten the biblical text of the Land, with its schisms and battles that reflect their own personal differences and disunities:

This is where the border was in the past says Udi, and I say in surprise, what border, with Jordan? And he says, no, of course not, between the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel, and I have forgotten that there was any such division, I look around in astonishment, seeking traces of an ancient wall, but the land is one and the same wherever I look, salty, moonstruck land.⁴⁴

This reads as a statement of the state of the nation: Na'ama has typically forgotten the biblical history she learnt at school and does not understand why the Bible is important to Udi as a map of the physical terrain as well as a spatial history of the Jewish people. The fissure within the nation is analogous to the dissension within their relationship. Not only are they not one flesh, as in Genesis (2:24), but they are divided yet inseparable, and she cannot extricate her own self from under the weight of Udi's "mastery." This is at once a rebellion against the imbalance in gender relations and against the inseparable bond with the nation and the Land:

We're not one flesh, one body, but two bodies that have changed places, I am wearing his body and he's wearing mine, each renouncing his own, and it seems as if all our lives we have been striving for this renunciation.⁴⁵

Na'ama gladly accepts the comfort of her husband's body and submits to the ritual of her covenant with it, which is not like sex, but (in a fetal analogy) like rocking in a giant cradle:

Like a birth, where the sexual organs play a different role, burning in a different fire, and this fire licks my groin with its little tongue, the fire of an ancient, painful covenant, the covenant we should have made many years ago, consuming all doubts, frightening and consoling, if you are true to it no harm will come to you.⁴⁶

The body-nation trope, to which we will return in Chapter 3, recurs in the Bible (especially in the Prophets) as a metaphor for the covenant between God and Israel, who is likened to an unfaithful wife and harlot in Hosea.⁴⁷ Na'ama readily imagines herself drinking the bitter cup of divine wrath

(reminding us of the punishment of the sinful nation in Jeremiah, but also the *sotah* or adulterous woman). Biblical and modern Hebrew intertwine, yet the intimate biblical metaphor of the marital covenant which binds God and Israel, husband and wife, sows doubts and dissension in the couple's limbs offered on the altar of marriage:

The dismembered corpses of our doubts lie before us on the sheets like sacrificial offerings, and I kneel on the enormous bed, like a field of cotton it encompasses me, white and generous, and I can run through its vastness and wave my arms, embrace the air of the world with open arms, I have no doubt, the Holy Spirit has passed here, like a bird it entered the window to sanctify us forever, [...] tonight I have understood everything, how good it is to be rid of the torturing doubts, now I understand that for me he is like a child or parents, impossible to choose or to free yourself from, and this binds us, this is what makes us husband and wife.⁴⁸

In this passage, rich in intertextuality, Na'ama thinks of making love as giving birth to Udi and envelops him in compassion, but when he falls asleep, she becomes frightened that he is poisoning their relationship with malice or is going to leave her. This characteristic double bind pulls apart Shalev's women between maternal, nurturing control and dependence on the male.

That dependence turns around when one day Udi returns from one of his trips and has a stroke in bed. His paralysis is an embodiment of his inability to relate to her or to their daughter, leaving Na'ama lonely and angry at her humdrum life. Afraid of being infected by his paralysis, she declares:

...I shudder, I can feel my life being drained out of me, gently, drop by drop, collecting in a puddle outside this room, and weightless and airy I try to hold onto the open window, surveying the room as if I am a spring bird which has landed up here by accident.⁴⁹

Udi, the failed, absent father, is now powerless, apart from his mouth and eyes that express his sullen resentment and bitter hatred. She hopes he can no longer manipulate and control her but she is wrong: later he blames her for his sickness. Like Samson, he feels he is emasculated by a woman and then blinded. In a projection of castration fantasy, he accuses her of sucking his seed from him. This transformation in her situation makes Na'ama relive the story of her dysfunctional family (an alcoholic, absentee mother, her own failures and weaknesses), until she comes to realize the impossibility of separating from the shadow of her husband, into which she grew from the time she was an adolescent in love with him.

Ruled by the tyranny of his sickness, Na'ama discards the copy of the Bible from which the sand was seeping out, symbolically trying to tear away from the God-given connection with the Land and from the man who in his

madness is living out the stories of the Bible. Too late Na'ama faces the truth that their mutual anger, resentment, and hatred brought on his sickness, which can be cured only if they release the bonds that secure them to each other but are also slowly destroying each of them. When Udi walks out on her, she discovers she can only love a stranger, a married man in a casual affair that frees her from the past. Again, as in *Love Life*, the disturbing amorality of Na'ama's behavior implicitly poses questions about the effects on women of bourgeois marriage and domestic *ennui* in a society where women outwardly have independence and equality. Zeruya Shalev has been said to spurn the mantle of the Hebrew male writer who takes up social and moral issues;⁵⁰ like many postmodern writers, she turns inwards to the inner world of women in order to explore their intimate desires and individual anxieties. This is a feminist perspective on how women are trapped in unhappy and abusive relationships in a male-dominated society, which reads also as a parable of relations with the nation.

The egalitarian socialist ethos of the kibbutz movement demanded that Israeli women bear the same burdens as men (at least in principle), but contemporary life added to these responsibilities the chores of loading the washing machine, shopping, and collecting the kids from kindergarten. Despite their prominent roles in the pioneering days of the *yishuv* (most famously, Henrietta Szold), women were not equally represented in political parties and labor laws restricted women's rights. Only in the 1970s did the women's movement, influenced by Western feminism, gain ground and bring women's rights into public debate.⁵¹ Feminist critics characterize the treatment of women in Israel's army and public institutions as gendering women's bodies in a masculine culture, which persisted in the transition from collectivism and the ideology of Nordau's Muscular Jew to the individualism of Israel's liberal democracy and consumer culture.⁵² Likewise, Ya'ara's demeaning and emasculating female gaze reveals a disturbing lack of reciprocity in love relationships, disconnected from former ties and family, as well as revealing a troubling reification of the female body, which is constantly subject to male authority, resulting in disappointment and loss.

Histories of Love

Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005) offers a complementary narrative to Zeruya Shalev's interior female monologues. Alma Singer's pubescent self-consciousness develops very differently from Ya'ara's compulsive obsessions, and she becomes an ultra-sensitive young woman who acts the intrepid adventurer out to solve the mystery of her identity and that of the author of *History of Love*. The history of love in the novel's title is one that Leo Gursky once turned into a novel of that title which his friend Zvi Litvinoff plagiarized in a Spanish version. It then finds its way into the life of Alma Singer, growing up in America. Not only does Alma's father name her for the heroine of the novel, but her mother is translating it into English. It is a story of lost love, but

also of traumatic loss in the Holocaust as well as a search for the real author of *The History of Love* and, more generally, for paternity and self.

Love, however, does not heal history or personal loss. As in Shalev's novels, bodies just don't seem to fit together easily. Repeatedly, women and men can't coordinate mouths, tongues, and noses, with the exception of Alma's boyfriend Herman, who is leaving for college anyway. This is not simply an adolescent's self-conscious awkwardness or the embarrassment of awakening to sexuality. It is as if love cannot be contained in the body. Lovers become entangled in the impossibility of finding words to say what they feel. This is because the self is far too burdened by grief and despair to do more than (in Gursky's favorite expression) the "opposite of disappearing." The "opposite of disappearing" describes Leo's discovery of fading photographs when his image fails to emerge in a photo, an underexposure that later repeats itself in a passport photo booth.⁵³ However, in a larger context, it sums up how he understands surviving the disappearance of his family in the Holocaust. This is the identity of the survivor seen through negativity rather than a heroic endurance of violence and unbearable suffering. Leo was not there with his relatives when they were killed, and therefore he does not share the victims' absence in family and collective memory.

A delicately woven strand connects Alma, a precocious teenager, with the ageing Leo, whose life has been spent in flight after the loss of loved ones, whose life has been spent dying alone, whose lonely life is a history of love. There is here a confidence, if not a faith, in the power of love to sustain the human in a world of destruction and alienation, yet it is a thin hope amid fragility, whether it is Leo's heart condition or the Age of Glass in Litvinoff's plagiarism of Gursky's *The History of Love*. Like Zeruya Shalev's impotent or sterile male lovers, these are weak men beset by self-doubt and moral uncertainty who lament the loss of romantic love. As in Zeruya Shalev, there seems little empowerment or fulfillment in this history of love. After Rosa tries to seduce him, a fly settles on Litvinoff's shriveled penis; Gursky is humiliated as a boy when caught in his fetish for women's underwear and shamed as an old man by his shrunken testicles. The aged Gursky puts his body on display to be seen, out of fear of dying unnoticed in solitude. These male characters are often defeated by overwhelming historical and personal circumstances; this makes a correlation between lack of agency in history and the impotence or sterility of the body.

As in *Love Life*, the commonplace trope of mirrors, in which the protagonists glimpse or watch themselves, deepens the sense of solitude and detachment when individuals submit to the scrutiny of the corporeal gaze as they search for self and for love. In her painful introspective self-reflection in the mirror, Alma Singer examines her naked body to test whether it could be fit for love:

In the bathroom I took off my T-shirt and underwear, stood on the toilet, and stared at myself in the mirror. I tried to think of five adjectives

to describe what I looked like and one was *scrawny* and one was *My ears stick out*. I considered a nose ring. When I raised my arms over my head, my chest became concave.⁵⁴

She eventually finds Leo, who has been searching for his Alma. She is working through the loss of the father she barely knew, while Leo is still coming to terms with the death of a son he did not know and is mourning the total loss of his family which left his life empty. Their meeting at the end of the novel, engineered by Alma Singer's brother (who is under the delusion that Alma is looking for her true father, which may in a deeper sense be true), cannot restore lost love, nor can it restore Alma's father, or Gursky's son, or indeed the lost manuscript of the Yiddish original of Gursky's novel, deliberately drowned by Rosa. Indeed, such stratagems are typical of the haphazard coincidences and mistaken motivations that make the plot come together almost against its own sense of random events and chance fates.

That impression of planned randomness in the way events are plotted can be seen in the unsatisfactory relationships in Krauss's next novel *Great House* (2010). As in Zeruya Shalev's *Husband and Wife*, this is a composite portrait of individuals who have come apart from family and home, but also from history. They harbor within them loss and traumatic memory which cannot be spoken of except in fiction. In her painful anatomy of marital breakdown, which sums up her view of the human condition, the writer-figure Nadia confesses how little she ever considered her ex-husband S. and describes her grief, shame, and guilt for her failure to share her life with him as well as for retreating into the writing of yet another novel, which offers an escape from dealing with her situation and herself:

I won't go into the pain of two people prying apart their lives inch by inch, the sudden vulnerability of the human situation, the sorrow, regret, anger, guilt, and disgust with oneself, the fear and suffocating loneliness, but also the relief, so incomparable, and I will only say that when it was all finished I found myself alone again in a new apartment, surrounded by my belongings and what was left of Daniel Varsky's furniture, which followed me like a pack of mangy dogs.⁵⁵

Nadia realizes the emptiness of her life after the loss of furniture that was someone else's and it is furniture that provides an absent presence in her apartment but also a clue to a larger absence that haunts her and her family.

The mysterious acquisition or loss of furniture (R.'s piano or Varsky's desk) represents the disembodied memory of absent lovers or of family who disappeared in the Holocaust. This dual track of traumatic rupture makes for an overwhelming sense in this novel of irreparable loss that connects the fictional persona with Freud's own uprooting from Vienna and with a metaphorical as well as literal attempt to redeem loss in the recovery and collection of furniture, much as Walter Benjamin (in "Theses on the Philosophy of History")

sees the recuperation of objects in a kind of bricolage as a form of redemption. George Weisz, an antique furniture dealer, compulsively and stealthily restitutes his family's possessions confiscated or left behind in the Holocaust. He spends his life trying to reassemble his father's study as it was on the day he was taken away, just as in real life Freud's study in Vienna was reconstructed in his London exile and preserved by his daughter exactly as it was the moment he died in September 1939. Visitors are reminded they are viewing not only a house but a mind, a trope to which the novel alludes, not least in the metacritical figure of the writing desk with its locked drawers, like the locked doors in Nadia's mind which she cannot open and which block her ability to love.

It is Varsky's desk that Weisz sends his daughter Leah to retrieve in New York, a missing piece of the Holocaust past given to Varsky by Lotte Berg, who identifies with him as the son she gave away. It embodies the presence of Lotte's former lover. However, instead of releasing Weisz from his obsessive compulsion to restore the lost furniture of his own family and of the families of others, Leah's subterfuge in withholding the recovered desk from her father precipitates his death in a final closure, without freeing Leah and Yoav from his hold on them. Only Weisz knows that the locked drawer is empty, yet another empty signifier in a postmodern metaphor for the inability to undo loss of love or to complete mourning.⁵⁶

Like Ya'ara's alienation from her own home, Nadia feels distanced from her apartment and its furniture. None of the women in *Great House* finds a loving home. When Nadia hears a child screaming in a New York street, she cannot answer the call for help or for love. When seeing a mother picking up her screaming child at a Passover *seder*, she decides she could never be a source of peace and rescue for anyone—she puts off having a child until it is too late and dedicates herself to her writing, which takes over the emotional needs her husband could not meet. All the protagonists have suffered from dominating fathers and some show symptoms of abuse or psychological damage. Yoav and Leah (who are rumored to have an incestuous relationship) were brought up in no less than 17 cities. These are cosmopolitan cities of exile that swallow up the individual, who must face the fear of death as well as the futility and uncertainty of life alone. Loneliness is something the writer both fears and needs.

Love cannot be trusted. It is too much of a balancing act, too performative. When Izzy (as Isabel calls herself) first sleeps with him in the large house in London's Belsize Park, Yoav's strange lovemaking resembles an acrobatic performance:

At last we were naked. But instead of continuing in the vein we'd been going in, Yoav switched course and started to roll, an actual somersault, with me attached to him. Once we'd gone around 360 degrees, he started to roll again. I had gone along with plenty of strange or kinky things during sex, but this was the strangest because there was nothing remotely sexy about it, not for me, and, as far as I could tell, not for him. We were like two people practicing for the circus.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, Izzy finds a direct, unabashed intimacy with Yoav she has not felt before, a naked sincerity usually lacking in postmodern love, yet we cannot help also noticing a certain distance of observation: Yoav obsessively jots down in a notebook how her body responds to his acts of arousal. Later, they have sex on each piece of antique furniture Weisz has collected in the house, as if exorcising ghosts that once owned the stolen or abandoned chairs and tables, a fetish that attempts to take possession of the father's property, but that brings a foreboding of loss. Izzy feels unsure how long her relationship with Yoav will last, especially given his father's interference, although they do have a child together. After their father's suicide, Yoav and his sister Leah become recluses in their Jerusalem house, cut off from the world and from the love of Izzy, who surrenders any solid sense of self and merges with them. There they remain under their father's control, living out the restrictions he placed on them during their privileged childhood. There is no way out of the father's house, which they inhabit and which inhabits them.

The reader quickly discovers the mirroring and displacement in the disparate stories of *Great House*, which are connected by surprising coincidences and allusions. These stories replicate the sadness left by death and by the shadow of the Holocaust, which haunts the sensibilities of the children of the survivors. Izzy, for example, imagines a resemblance to Himmler in the wealthy Belgian nobleman Leclercq and is reminded of the property requisitioned by the Nazis in the draped furniture in his turreted castle. Above all, Krauss, no less than Zeruya Shalev, leaves us with the impression of the failure of love, the failure of fathers to love their children, and of lovers to share each other's pain. Despite the intricate textual and metatextual connections that bring together diverse narrative strands, it is too late for love. In Zeruya Shalev's novels, women are stuck in a vicious circle that does not allow them to satisfy their desire because their sexuality threatens the emasculated men they love, but in both Shalev and Krauss the protagonists are also handicapped by incommensurable loss: Ya'ara is still mourning the death of a brother in childhood; Alma Singer mourns her loss of her father at the age of seven. In Zeruya Shalev's *Husband and Wife* and *Love Life*, romance and harmony cannot be restored, there can only be a recognition of inner torment. In Krauss's *The History of Love*, Gursky finds Alma too late for his life and love to be restored and he is reduced to muteness in his acknowledgment of her recognition of him as the author of *The History of Love*. His final communication is to tap affirmatively, in the same code he used for his dead friend Bruno. However, their mutual recognition enables the long-postponed mourning process that ends the novel with "The Death of Leopold Gursky," an obituary that Litvinov has stolen from Gursky and incorporated into his plagiarism of *The History of Love*.

In *Great House*, it is no less difficult to come to terms with the past. Dov's moral dilemma in the Yom Kippur War, whether to save himself and abandon his dying commander in a burning tank, has left him with psychological

scars that never healed. Now, after giving up his career as a judge, he returns home to Israel only to be knocked down when wandering, estranged and lost, in the Jerusalem Forest, by Nadia, who is recklessly driving a stolen car after the rejection of her sexual advances to a younger man of dubious character. Nadia's testimony to the investigating judge connects her loss of love to her search for self, but this confession of her own guilt may have come too late for Dov to regain consciousness, let alone forgive her. If, on another level, she is confessing her iniquities to a heavenly court, we are given no certainty that she will be heard, let alone forgiven.

Shalev's and Krauss's stories of postmodern love tell of women's estrangement from self and from family, but also from history, whether Israel's traumatic struggle for survival or collective loss in the Holocaust. In the next chapter, we will take up the thread of traumatic loss, ghosted in the furniture in *Great House*, and contemplate how much that loss impacts on postmodern love and on individual connections with a national narrative of destruction and exile from Yavneh to Masada and from Auschwitz to Yavneh.

Notes

- 1 On the origins of the love religion in the sentimental novel, see Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, revised ed. (London: Granada, 1970), 45–58.
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- 3 Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 2–3.
- 4 Jonathan M. Hess, *Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German-Jewish Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 115–20.
- 5 See Michael Galchinsky, *The Origin of the Modern Jewish Woman Writer: Romance and Reform in Victorian England* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996); Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Todd Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 6 Naomi Seidman, *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).
- 7 Seidman, *The Marriage Plot*, 21–69.
- 8 Seidman, *The Marriage Plot*, 9–10.
- 9 Seidman, *The Marriage Plot*, 5–7.
- 10 Seidman, *The Marriage Plot*, 153.
- 11 Seidman, *The Marriage Plot*, 153–55. See Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999), 67–73.
- 12 Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers* (New York: University Press, 2005), 528, 537; David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 318–22.
- 13 See Josh Lambert, *Unclean Lips: Obscenity, Jews, and American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

- 14 See Maurice Charney, *Sexual Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 218–19; David Punter, *Writing the Passions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014). On the influence of Freud on modern ideas of sexuality as distinct from marital love, see Reddy, “The Rule of Love,” 47.
- 15 See Kathryn Hellerstein, “The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems: Celia Dropkin and Her Contemporaries,” in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*, ed. Sheila E. Jelen, Michael P. Kramer, and L. Scott Lerner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 189–212.
- 16 Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 222–24. Bashevis Singer was criticized for his depiction of sexual depravity; see Noam Gil, “In Praise of Vulgarity: On Yiddish in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s ‘Di makhsheyfeh,’” *Prooftexts* 37, no. 1 (2018): 86–101. Bashevis Singer defended himself by pointing out that the Bible also included indecent scenes such as Lot’s daughters, as he wrote in “Indecent Language, Sex, and Censorship in Literature,” trans. Mirra Ginsburg and B. Chertoff, *In geveb* (October 2015); <https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/indecnt-language-sex-and-censorship-in-literature>, accessed March 21, 2019. On interethnic sex in American Yiddish fiction, see Jessica Kirzane, “‘What Kind of a Man Are You?’: Interethnic Sexual Encounter in Yiddish American Narratives,” in *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*, ed. Lisa J. Grushcow (New York: Central Council of American Rabbis, 2014), 195–208.
- 17 For a study of the cultural politics of Jewish-Christian sexual relations in twentieth-century American culture, see Joshua Louis Moss, *Why Harry Met Sally: Subversive Jewishness, Anglo-Christian Power, and the Rhetoric of Modern Love* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).
- 18 On the discursive and rhetorical use of intermarriage, see Sara R. Horowitz, “Lovin’ Me, Lovin’ Jew: Gender, Intermarriage, and Metaphor,” in *Antisemitism and Philosemitism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century*, ed. Phyllis Lassner and Lara Trubowitz (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010), 196–216.
- 19 On *Abie’s Irish Rose* as a cultural construction of the “melting pot,” see Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 73–77. On American cultural images of marrying out from the 1930s to 1990s, see Keren R. McGinity, *Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Intermarriage, and Fatherhood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).
- 20 G. K. Chesterton, “A Defense of Rash Vows,” *American Chesterton Society*, accessed April 18, 2014; <http://www.chesterton.org/a-defence-of-rash-vows/>.
- 21 Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 56–57.
- 22 See Illouz, *Consuming The Romantic Utopia*, 174.
- 23 Jeffery Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (New York: Picador, 2011), 19.
- 24 Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 22.
- 25 Rebecca Goldstein, *The Mind-Body Problem* (New York: Random House, 1983), 188.
- 26 Goldstein, *The Mind-Body Problem*, 89.
- 27 For a reading of Goldstein’s novel from a critical feminist perspective, see Susan Jacobowitz, “‘Hardly There Even When She Wasn’t Lost’: Orthodox Daughters and the ‘Mind-Body Problem’ in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction,” in *Unfinalized Moments: Essays in the Development of Contemporary Jewish American Narrative*, ed. Derek Parker Royal (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011), 17–32; Janet Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing since the 1980s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 163–65.
- 28 Melvin Bukiet, “Introduction,” in *Neurotica: Jewish Writers on Sex*, ed. Melvin Bukiet (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), xiv; Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 220–22.

- 29 Aaron Tillman, *Magical American Jew: The Enigma of Difference in Contemporary Jewish American Short Fiction and Film* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 13–31. See also Shaina Hammerman, *Silver Screen, Hasidic Jews: The Story of an Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018); Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 204–10.
- 30 Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (London: Minerva, 1994), 11. On the reception of Jong's novel and the reasons why it was not accepted into a Jewish American canon, see Tobin Belzer, "Written in and Read Out: Why Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* Was Not Considered Jewish Writing," in *Lost on the Map of the World: Jewish-American Women's Quest for Home in Essays and Memoirs, 1890–Present*, ed. Phillippa Kafka (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 140–51. See also Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 224–27.
- 31 Andrew Winer, *Marriage Artist* (New York: Holt, 2010), 17.
- 32 Andrew, *Marriage Artist*, 180.
- 33 Andrew, *Marriage Artist*, 190.
- 34 Andrew, *Marriage Artist*, 203.
- 35 Andrew, *Marriage Artist*, 203.
- 36 Gershon Shaked, "Editorial," *Modern Hebrew Literature* [N.S.] no. 2 (Autumn–Winter 2005–06): 1–3. For a study of postmodern love in Hebrew prose fiction of the 1990s, see Yaron Peleg, *Israeli Culture between the Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).
- 37 Gisèle Sapiro, "La réception de l'œuvre de Zeruya Shalev en France," *Yod* 20 (2015); <http://yod.revues.org/2432>. For reasons why the Israeli literary establishment has been slow to accept Shalev into the canon, see Yigal Schwartz, *Mekonenet bemikhnasey namer: Omanut hasipur shel tsuriya shalev* [A lamenter in leopard pants: Zuriya Shalev's art of fiction] (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2017). On Ronit Matlon's similar writing against the political grain and its unsentimental depiction of the violence done to women's bodies, see Shiri Goren, "The Materiality and Embodiment of Violence: Ronit Matalon's Poetics of Responsibility," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2019); <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3575>.
- 38 Rose L. Levinson, *Death of a Holy Land: Reflections in Contemporary Israeli Fiction* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 71–81. I will return to this theme in Chapter 6.
- 39 Zeruya Shalev, *Love Life*, trans. Dalya Bilu (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 91; *Khayei ahavah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1997), 104.
- 40 Yigal Schwartz, "The Frigid Option: A Psychocultural Study of the Novel *Love Life* by Zeruya Shalev," in *History and Literature: New Readings of Jewish Texts in Honor of Arnold J. Band*, ed. William Cutter and David C. Jacobson (Providence, RI: Program in Judaic Studies Brown University, 2002), 479–88.
- 41 Halevi-Wise, "The 'Double Triangle' Paradigm: National Redemption in Bi-generational Love Triangles from Agnon to Oz," *Prooftexts* 26 (2006): 309–43. The French critic René Girard has proposed that "triangular desire" is endemic in the modern novel (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965], 1–52).
- 42 Shalev, *Love Life*, 156; *Khayei ahavah*, 173.
- 43 See the legends in BT Gittin, analyzed in Julia Watts Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Gender, Sex, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 44 Zeruya Shalev, *Husband and Wife*, trans. Dalya Bilu (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 76; *Ba'al veisha* (Tel Aviv: Keshet, 2000), 87.
- 45 Shalev, *Husband and Wife*, 94; *Ba'al veisha*, 106.

- 46 Shalev, *Husband and Wife*, 94; *Ba'al veisha*, 106.
- 47 On the biblical intertext in this novel see Vered Shemtov, "The Bible in Contemporary Israeli Literature: Text and Place in Zeruya Shalev's *Husband and Wife* and Michal Govrin's *Snapshots*," *Hebrew Studies* 47 (2006): 363–84.
- 48 Shalev, *Husband and Wife*, 94–95; *Ba'al veisha*, 106–07.
- 49 Shalev, *Husband and Wife*, 6. *Ba'al veisha*, 12–13.
- 50 Tamar Setter, "Is There Place for a New Watchwoman for the House of Israel? Zeruya Shalev's *Love Life*," *Yod: Revue des études hébraïques et juives* 20 (2015): <http://journals.openedition.org/yod/2286>; accessed January 8, 2018.
- 51 Natalie Rein, *Daughters of Rachel: Women in Israel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 50–54, 101–13.
- 52 Meira Weiss, *The Chosen Body: The Politics of the Body in Israeli Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 14–26. See Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 53 Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love* (New York: Norton, 2005), 82.
- 54 Krauss, *History of Love*, 170.
- 55 Krauss, *Great House* (New York: Norton, 2010), 40.
- 56 See Emily Miller Budick's reading of this novel as an example of blocked mourning, *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 272–78.
- 57 Nicole Krauss, *Great House*, 133.

2 From Auschwitz to Yavneh

Destruction without End

Sigmund Freud, addressing the final meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society on March 13, 1938, declared:

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Titus, Rabbi Yokhanan ben Zakkai asked for permission to open a school at Yavneh for the study of the Torah. We are going to do the same. We are, after all, accustomed by our history and tradition, and some of us by our personal experience, to being persecuted.¹

After Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938, Freud applied the analogy of Yokhanan ben Zakkai's move of Jewish learning to Yavneh to the need to flee the Nazis and establish the "temple" of psychoanalysis elsewhere, where its teachings could be disseminated. Yavneh has become a banner for the transmission of cultural Judaism or secular Jewishness in conditions of overwhelming adversity and assimilation, which sometimes loosely conscripts Ahad Ha'am's idea of a "Hebrew Yavneh" in Tel Aviv. One way of discussing the future of Jewish culture is to ask what one generation transmits to the next. More crucially, we need to understand how cultural transmission is ruptured by the traumatic violence of the Holocaust and the caesura of collective loss in constructions of Jewish identities and spaces.

In both Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* and *Great House* traumatic memory is literally unspeakable; yet, in the absence of personal experience of the Holocaust, if there is any legacy it is a generational inheritance of collective loss and dispossession, a pervading melancholia, a condition, Freud noted, in which the mourner turns inward on the damaged ego without being able to perceive the cause of grief.² Reading Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Krauss became aware of the deep meaning of nostalgia when there is nowhere and nobody to return to: the displacement of her grandparents in the Holocaust was "something inherited in the blood, a sense of a loss of a thing and a longing for it."³ That inheritance is reflected in the fact that Krauss gives Alma, Leo's lost love in *The History of*

Love, her maternal grandmother's name of Mereminski and the detail that Leo Gursky comes from her grandfather's hometown of Slonim. The sense of irreplaceable loss that pervades memory of the past bears down in both *The History of Love* and *Great House* on the self-effacement of the survivors.

The History of Love presents history as something that happens to individuals yet affects us all, an ineffable presence of something almost irretrievable and undefinable that has been lost.⁴ However, this needs to be placed in the larger context of post-apocalyptic writing, which presents survival as the universal human condition, as we see in *The History of Love* when Alma Singer continues the legacy of her father, who died of cancer, by writing *How to Survive in the Wild*, a notebook and self-help guide she consults in her search for clues to the identity of the author of the novel-in-the-novel *The History of Love*, as well as in search of her own identity. Moreover, in post-assimilationist America, personal identity is all the more elusive when Jews cannot always anchor their ethnicity in faith or community, or, after the break-up of house and home, in the family.

That is a question lurking behind Krauss's *Great House*, which is infused with the inbred Jewish mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, who "burnt every great house in fire" (Kings 2, 25:9). Escaping from a later siege of Jerusalem in the year 70 ACE, Rabbi Yokhanan ben Zakkai established a yeshiva in Yavneh, which ensured the transmission of the oral law and the consolidation of Rabbinical Judaism. This put an end to sectarianism and internecine strife and founded a post-Temple theology that gave a religious explanation for the destruction, but also authorized development of *halakhah* in the transition to a religion without the Temple and its sacrifices which absolved sins. This version of the transmission of the Oral Law (in BT Gittin 56a–b) is often cited as the basis of diaspora Judaism, unlike the version in the midrashic commentary to Lamentations (Eikha Rabbah, 1:31), where Yokhanan ben Zakkai does not mention Yavneh, but instead requests from Vespasian concessions for the rabbis of conquered Jerusalem. After all, it was at Yavneh that the canon of the Hebrew Bible was sealed and where rabbinical authority was established for generations to come. Yavneh later came to represent the continuity of the Jewish people after they were exiled. Only in the twentieth century did Zionism adopt Josephus's heroic account of the martyrdom at Masada as an alternative narrative of defiance and sacrifice, but one which negated the interlude of exilic history before the resettlement of the Land.⁵ This narrative became a mainstay of hope for endurance in the Nazi ghettos, but it ignores Josephus's apparent betrayal of the Jewish rebels when he went over to the Roman side, realizing, like Yokhanan ben Zakkai, that the revolt was doomed and that accommodation with the Romans was better than total defeat.

I argue that the narratives of exile and redemption, enshrined in God's covenant with Abraham in the Bible and formulated in the Haggadah (the ritual recital of the Exodus from Egypt), are subverted by Jewish writers in a post-secular era, who are skeptical about the myths of the past and

who doubt the personal relevance of Jewish history. Their post-apocalyptic responses after the Holocaust sometimes invoke Yokhanan ben Zakkai's legendary establishment of Yavneh, but not usually in its religious understanding that Torah learning ensured the survival of the Jews. We will see several examples of the story of Rabbi Yokhanan ben Zakkai being adapted to the post-apocalyptic notion of a *necessary destruction* which opens new possibilities of Judaism and Jewish identities. For Krauss, the "great house" is both Freud's home in his London exile (as we saw in the previous chapter) and the burnt house of a broader, less defined legacy after the Holocaust. It is also, in the double track of traumatic personal and collective loss, a break-up of home.

In *Great House*, the Holocaust survivor George Weisz follows a tradition taught to him by his father that Yavneh was the "great house" which preserved collective memory through the ages and sustained the Jews' identity through persecutions, exile, deportation, and genocide by turning books into memory, thus answering the question of what a Jew is without Jerusalem and without a nation.⁶ For this reason, Weisz sets about reassembling, piece by piece, his father's study, ransacked during the Holocaust, searching the world for the missing writing desk. In Krauss's novel, the writing desk offers an ambivalent trope for the situation of the writer who is overshadowed and daunted by a monstrous and menacing but compelling inheritance. That inheritance forms part of the self and part of the house in which the self resides (the storied book is, in a familiar literary trope, another kind of "house"). At the price of self-sacrifice (like the fictional Chilean poet Daniel Varsky) or separation and solitude (like Nadia), the protagonists willingly or unwillingly pass on the desk, which, unknown to them, carries the memory of the story of the east European Jewish world that was destroyed and can only be reassembled in a telling of the story of its imagined reassembly. Weisz never completes the reconstruction of his father's study but foresees that the key to the storage facility, where Leah has hidden the desk to thwart his plans, will be passed on to Yoav's son, the next generation. This resolution of the plot suggests that Krauss's novel is working against a recovery of the past as a messianic illusion and is proposing that memory can only be recovered piecemeal, in fragments which can be known only imperfectly to each generation.⁷

Krauss's novel proposes a transmission of a material heritage, yet what is being transmitted is not the religious tradition of Yavneh or of a viable and vibrant Jewish culture. It is never more than the memory of the story of devastation and destruction. It is barely the portable extraterritorial homeland that Heinrich Heine said Jews carried around with them in their books. In the novel's characteristic postmodernist indirection, Arthur Bender paraphrases the story that Weisz once retold him in a simplified and imprecise version:

Turn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself. Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form.⁸

In such an oblique poetics of negativity, any bridge that connects the individual to a collective identity is necessarily flimsy and fragile, constructed out of what Weisz calls the aspiration to reassemble the “memory of our memories,” which can be attained only in the afterlife (in which none of the protagonists believe).⁹ The generation born after the Holocaust appears racked by self-loathing and self-doubt and damaged by childhood abuse and emotional injury. When Nadia’s friends celebrate the Passover *seder*, the ultimate rite of communal and family identification with Jewish history, it is because they are too Jewish to cast off tradition, but too assimilated to make sense of it. Krauss thus presents in fictional form a less optimistic position than Cynthia Ozick did in “America: Toward Yavneh” (1970), not because she believes that a revival of Jewish culture is impossible in America, but because in conditions of postmodernity the self is unstable, adrift from social and communal solidarity or national identities, beset by the difficulties of establishing meaningful personal relations and unable to find an ideal love. The most that can be achieved is the recovery of loss through its fictional invention.¹⁰

Postmodern Holocausts: The Rape of History

In Krauss’s portrayal of the effervescent presence of traumatic loss, Jessica Lang sees a fundamental generic and aesthetic shift in the way that the Holocaust is represented: it is no longer depicted as a direct experience of unimaginable horror but, as in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), an encounter of the third generation with the black hole of their grandparents’ story, which they know imperfectly, if at all.¹¹ Nothing is sacred in Foer’s postmodern novel, which blurs the line between fact and fiction in its presentation of a nonsensical mystical religion in an irreverent pastiche of a *shtetl* and in its parody of Holocaust tourism. Alex, a sex-mad but inexperienced young Ukrainian, writes letters to a fictional Jonathan Safran Foer, referred to as the “hero” or “the Jew,” in which he comments on the chapters Jonathan has written or tries to intervene in the composition of the novel. The treatment of history is playful and counter-factual. However, if we depart from the generational model of Holocaust fiction which lays claim to a degree of testimony and memorialization in the writing of descendants of survivors¹² and leave aside what has been claimed to be the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish American literature,¹³ we could usefully shift the focus of the discussion onto what the novel *can* represent in an existential situation after Auschwitz in a way that renegotiates the meaning of Jewish life in the aftermath of destruction, but also interrogates the survival of art itself.

As in Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Klay*, the trope of escape and escapism proposes an escape route for the imagination in the face of a traumatic history of inhuman violence and genocide that can also offer a universal fellowship of solitude to readers.¹⁴ This is a basic

and commonplace ideal of all literature, to be sure, but attuned to a post-modern sensibility which acknowledges no aim beyond the conjuring up of the unsayable and the unspeakable, all the while aware of the ambivalence of the play of words and the unreliability of a single narrative. At the same time, working through collective mourning and individual melancholia are posited in Foer's fictional universe not as the recovery of the lost object (of love or of lives), but as the reinvention of the past as an erotic utopia, as an imaginary "Jewish" space in which libidinal desire is fulfilled until the orgasmic point of no return, when disaster strikes and the world is consumed.

There is wide agreement among critics and historians that the Holocaust was a paradigmatic unspeakable and incomprehensible event of Jewish history which has left us irrevocably in a post facto situation, *after* Auschwitz. Yet, in its postmodern literary rendering, the Holocaust shares with much post-apocalyptic fiction both the apparent lack of any redemptive power and the unreliability of narrating historical reality. The Holocaust has been placed prominently in critical discourses as symptomatic of the crisis of modernity or of the failure of the Enlightenment project. It is a pivotal event in postmodernist thought in all that concerns the definition of humanity and the limits of knowledge.¹⁵ Yet, as a paradigmatically postmodern event, the Holocaust has no meaning or purpose, except the finality of death. In the existential post-Auschwitz situation, writes Robert Eaglestone, everything has been permeated by the Holocaust.¹⁶ Claire E. Sufrin, however, draws a line between the categories of post-Holocaust and postmodern writing.¹⁷ I would also take issue with Joost Krijnen's view of the Holocaust as central to Jewish American literature, because this is to restrict the perspective of Jewish identity to the Holocaust and to American Jewry.¹⁸ The Holocaust is indeed pervasive in contemporary Jewish identity politics and American Jewish popular culture, but its postmodernist representation cannot be fully understood, I contend, outside a larger picture of how contemporary Jewish culture has both absorbed and challenged postmodernism.

The post-apocalypse in the aftermath of the Holocaust and all the more so after 9/11 has left personal relations in a spiraling limbo, with no salvation in sight. I suggest that this is the premise behind what I call *fictional holocausts*, such as Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, D. M. Thomas's *White Hotel*, and Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*. Foer's novel is, as Robert Eaglestone has commented, a typical postmodern novel in its mixing of the object of representation (the anti-mimesis of its impossibility) and the process of representation (self-consciously drawing attention to what it is doing and failing to do).¹⁹ The question his novel asks, Foer has remarked in an interview, is whether the Holocaust is "exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to 'the truth' of an event, and what is 'the truth'?" Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy?"²⁰ As critics have complained, there is a degree of callousness in the invention of a past of which the author has no direct experience or firm knowledge. Yet, Amy Hungerford has recognized a courageous attempt in Foer's debut

novel to promote an entirely imagined universe in which there can be space for contemporary Jews to find themselves as well as for the author to stake his place in the American literary canon.²¹ The claim of the Holocaust novel to witness an unspeakable trauma through the imagination is taken further in order to blur the limits of representation and challenge the monopoly on truth of testimony. The implication, however, is that the past cannot ever be known with any certainty, while the present is not contingent on any collective memory or shared traditions. That has implications for the postmodern construction (or deconstruction) of Jewish identities and all identity.

What binds the contemporary American reader to the east European Jewish heritage, in my reading of Foer's novel, is erotic love, in a rehash of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Bruno Schulz concocted by Roth's Alex Portnoy.²² *Everything is Illuminated*, in effect, presents a parody of an American Jew's search for his roots in Ukraine and for the woman who saved his grandfather during the Holocaust, which results in discovering very little of any real value, but fantasizes the sex lives of his grandfather and of a mythical *shtetl*. The annual carnival in Trachimbrod, where Brod appropriately dresses up as a mermaid (alluding to her origins in the river and her repressed sexuality), generates enough erotic energy to be seen from space, offering a cosmic transhistorical vision of sex lighting up the universe.

The paraders and *shtetl* folk were already drunk—arms around one another, hands on one another, fingers probing, thighs accommodating, all thinking only of her. The strings were beginning to sag (birds landed, depressing the middles; winds blew, swinging them side to side like waves), and the princesses had run to the shore to see the gold and lean against the visiting men.²³

Brod is not the center of this elaborate Chagallian canvas, which develops into a communal orgy, but she is the key to understanding the mystical sense of its universal hedonism. Everything is literally illuminated when Kolker sees Brod naked through the window after she was raped by the Polish squire Sofiowka and discovered the dead body of Yankel: "Her belly lit up like a firefly's bulb—brighter than a hundred thousand virgins making love for the first time."²⁴ Rape violates boundaries, reducing the woman's body to abjection, and it is accompanied here by the revelation of her adoptive father's corpse, but unexpectedly Foer draws from a historical tableau of the Polish landlord dominating his sexual property a strangely mystical illumination.

We come closer to understanding Foer's fictionalized erotic mysticism when the crippled dead arm of ten-year-old Grandfather Safran becomes a fetish with local women, including an unbelievable number of widows and virgins. The lurid account of the prodigious boy's sexual exploits (in every possible position) culminates in the reenactment of Trachimbrod's foundation myth in the theater, attended by Jonathan's grandfather (the

young Safran) and the gypsy girl, and closes with a Joycean climax that recalls Molly's "yes" at the end of *Ulysses*.²⁵ Following Freud's theory of melancholia, we can surmise that the fantasy origin in the river/womb of the vanished *shtetl* world connects with the recovery of the libido in the crippled ego. As a love object, the dead arm (a phallic symbol more significant, we are told, in arousal than the rest of his body) symbolizes the collective as well as personal phantom limb that has been amputated, as it were, and represents the larger family and collective loss. That loss can only be redeemed through love.

The profane epiphany after the carnival reoccurs when Grandfather Safran achieves his first orgasm after he marries, as German bombs rain down in a cataclysm of light and his former Gypsy lover slits her wrists.²⁶ This epiphany, accompanied by flashes of lightning and heavenly fire, puts us in mind of D. M. Thomas's reworking in his erotic novel *The White Hotel* of an episode in Anatoli Kuznetsov's documentary novel *Babii Yar*, which unites the corpses of massacred Jews in a Freudian conflation of Eros and Thanatos. Here, however, each *shtetl* dweller conceals not just erotic dreams but (if we were to take seriously Foer's invention of a nonsensical communal chronicle called *The Book of Antecedents*) also a novel waiting to burst out.²⁷ Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, understood the two fundamental drives (*Urtriebe*) of life to be Eros and Thanatos, and these opposing forces form a duality in the human psyche that explains the fascination in post-Holocaust novels with the coming together of the sex instinct and the destructive pull of death. The graphic description of sex in Foer's fantasy of the east European *shtetl* reads as a grotesque and surreal example of magic realism, yet it points to a nexus that helps us understand the erotic impulse in our confrontation with the obscene unspeakability of what the Nazis perpetrated, which is at the same time the most banal evil.

Nevertheless, nothing in the "illumination" in Foer's magical realism really throws light on the facts of history. The horrific "real" moment of the mass execution of Trachimbrod's Jews, for example, presents a further episode of rape, though this time one that (in principle) should shock, not titillate the reader. When the Nazi officer shoots a pregnant woman in her vagina after her father refuses to spit on a Torah scroll, we are told that her father disobeys not because he believes in God, but because he refuses to comply. The result of this act of rebellion is an actual violation, but also metaphorically a violation of history. Foer's fictionalized version of the historical massacre of the Jews of the real Trokhimbrid, known in Polish as Zofiówka or Trochenbrod in Yiddish, in a nearby forest on the Day of Atonement, 1942, is a further example of what I call the rape of history, when Foer attempts to master his own version of a mythicized past. Unable to mourn what traumatized his family three generations previously, Foer's "narrative fetishism" (to borrow a phrase of Eric Santner) self-consciously constructs a narrative which expunges the traces of the traumatic loss which called it into existence in the first place, but which refuses to go away. In Santner's analysis of postwar Germany's

refusal to mourn the Holocaust dead, the mourning work which cannot be completed is postponed, avoiding the need for reconstituting self-identity in post-traumatic conditions: "it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere."²⁸ In Foer's case, however, the erased traumatic event has to be reinvented in order to give it existence in memory. Foer's representation of rape represents a violation of the collective past which cannot be healed but which connects the loss that haunts Foer's and Krauss's novels with a generation that cannot, because of the temporal divide and historical distance, complete mourning work.

What Foer is doing is to sidestep familiar narratives of Jewish history and make the disappearance of Trachimbrod a point of origin in the emplotment of the novel, which reaches back in time to a mythical beginning that proceeds intractably toward its destruction, but also (in a reverse chronology) tracks the interstellar perspective of the 1969 moon landing. In repudiating the apparently unmediated historical realism of documented evidence or survivor testimony as inadequate or inaccessible, Foer's magical realism, as Jenni Adams shows, subverts the epistemological premises of history and lures the reader into belief.²⁹ The reader feels guilty pleasure, falls in love with this remarkably seductive novel, but is made to feel disturbed at the source of that pleasure in traumatic loss. Narrative fetishism seeks in Freudian terms, as Santner explains, to reinstate the pleasure principle without working through traumatic memory by cancelling out the need for anxiety which results in trauma.³⁰ In calling on Freud's thoughts on shell-shocked and wounded World War One soldiers in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Santner addresses the attempts by German historians and filmmakers to restore their national narrative that was interrupted by state violence in a previous generation. In the admittedly different context of the post-Holocaust novel, there is a similar need to find symbolic strategies in order to restore the narrative pleasure of historical narrative, despite a conscious disavowal of any possibility of historical knowledge. In that sense, the symbolic rape in the novel is a violation of the womb from which Foer's fictional alter ego has been traumatically separated in an act of violence with which he cannot come to terms because it cannot be known except in fantasy.

As in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, the "hero" searches for the woman who was witness to the fate of his family and who can tell him about his identity. However, the woman "Foer" thinks saved his grandfather, Lista, whom he refers to as Augustine (a symbolic mother with whom the "Foer" character would like to be reunited), cannot serve as "witness" to the photograph that he shows her. Her painstakingly classified collection of photographs and articles saved from the remains of Trachimbrod, which has long ceased to exist, is a collection of unconnected museological artifacts and does not bring him closer to knowledge about his grandfather, Safran, about whom he makes up bawdy stories of precocious feats of adulterous sex. "We are being," Alex comments on these erotic adventures, "very nomadic with the

truth.”³¹ This foregrounds the problem of profaning the memory of the Holocaust, but also of telling unflattering lies in a story several times removed from the real world. Indeed, the name Safran is an arbitrary invention, like the name of his “very-great-grandmother” Brod (a foundling of unknown parentage who is fished out of the river like Aphrodite rather than Moses). The fictional “Foer’s” inability to identify with the past and establish his own identity through mourning work is enacted by the postmodern disruption of the narrative and the frustrating yet comic mediation of Jonathan’s insufferably guileless translator and guide Alex.

As for Sebald in *Austerlitz*, the author of *Everything is Illuminated* has no personal memory of the Holocaust and he can only recover historical trauma through indirection and bricolage (somewhat like Walter Benjamin’s collecting of fragments in his *Arcades Project*). “Foer,” however, is unsuccessful in redeeming the past and cannot bear to hear the harrowing stories that Lista, the last survivor of Trachimbrod, tells about what the Nazis did to her father and the other local Jews. The story breaks down with the confession of Alex’s grandfather and the fragmentation of the novel’s multiple texts. The story is untellable, but in telling its untellability Foer makes a point about how all stories are mediated and cannot tell us whether it was like this or like that. What remains are random artifacts which Lista has collected in an objectifying methodical rigor that robs them of the meaning they once had, but together they make up the *bric à brac* of Jewish identity after the total destruction of the Holocaust. These objects are no more meaningful than the flotsam that surfaces in the foundation myth of Trachimbrod’s naming, a motley collection of obscene and trivial items, among numerous other examples in the novel of how collection and cataloging prevent the forming of a collective portrait of the *shtetl* inhabitants and their communal life. This destroyed community is imagined as having no shared purposes or legacy beyond fragments of prophetic texts and prescient visions of rape and destruction, and thus the novel refracts the postmodern condition of disaffiliation and implosion of any collective identity.

This is not to say that Foer’s comic treatment of the Holocaust or the novel’s obsessive eroticism should be condemned for trivializing the Holocaust. A similar resistance to definitive representation or totalizing accounts can be found in Nathan Englander’s absurd and implausible story “The Tumblers” (in *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*), in which religious Jews pass as circus acrobats to fool the Nazis and thus act the fools out of a folktale about the Wise Men of Chelm, in a bewildering confusion of mythical figures with an unimaginable reality. The sleight of hand of magical realism is a deliberate act of “Holocaust impiety,” as Joost Krijnen calls it,³² a deliberate blasphemy that challenges the conventional distinction between fact and fiction. This is to challenge the view (held by Lawrence Langer, Alvin Rosenfeld, and other scholars) that a Holocaust novel should acknowledge the exceptional rules of an exceptional event. Yet postmodernism treats all events, whatever we mean by an “event,” as at the limits of representation.

My argument is that what should disturb us about Foer's and Englander's postmodern *fictional holocausts* is that they are exactly that and not "Holocaust fictions." They have no pretension to represent the Holocaust, and instead, they posit a mythical reconstruction of the traditional Jewish *shtetl* as a timeless, invented realm in which truth is relative and facts are ultimately unknowable or unverifiable, but which is forever dying, not living, in the postmodern Jewish imaginary. History has no power to save the Jews, only to destroy them. Foer and Englander thus measure their distance from their identification with beliefs and traditions that have no place in postmodernity. As Joost Krijnen puts it, the displacement of historical reality into myth measures the disturbing and unreachable distance from the enormity of what happened as well as from the "nothing but nothing" that Foer found on his own failed trip to Ukraine, a failure which gives him total artistic freedom to reinvent the void that might once have been Trachimbrod in *Everything is Illuminated*.³³

The imagination can indeed be put to work to summon the horror of the experience of being *there* without the need for verification of facts, as Cynthia Ozick demonstrated in *The Shawl*. But that example shows exactly why Foer's novel should be read as an American disaster fantasy rather than a third-generation Holocaust novel about American Jews' difficulties in finding a usable past. *The Shawl* connects the unspeakable past with a post-traumatic life in which Rosa has to work through her loss, put away the shawl that gagged her primal scream, and find love. However sordid Rosa considers Persky's interest in her underwear, there is an amorous relationship that could end the compulsive obsession with a dead child and help her come to terms with the past. Foer, however, leaves little space for romantic love in a world slated prophetically for disaster.³⁴ For Foer, this is a terminal event that brought Jewish history to closure and inaugurated an era of apocalyptic disaster.

(Not) Letting Go of the Disappearance of the Past

Foer was not the first to pry into the intimate lives of east European Jews before and during the Holocaust. David Grossman appropriates in his novel *'Ayen 'erekh: ahavah* (*See Under: Love*, 1985) the lurid and erotic surrealism of the Polish Jewish artist and writer Bruno Schulz in order to describe the attempt of his writer-persona Shlomo (Momik) to contradict Adorno's interdiction of lyrical poetry after Auschwitz. As Grossman has explained, a Schulzian fantasy is the only way to open up the imagination in the face of genocidal thinking.³⁵ In Grossman's postmodern fantasy, Schulz escapes his fate at the hands of an SS officer who (in historical reality) shot him in the Drohobycz ghetto and plunges into a shoal of salmon, who, like the Jews, wander the earth obeying a homing instinct to return to the place of their birth.³⁶ Entering the imagination of the "Bruno" figure, Shlomo joins Shloma son of Tobias, just released from prison, who is invited to Bruno's house in Schulz's story "The Age of Genius" (in *Pod Klepsydrą*, 1938;

Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass, 1978). In the Schulz story, we get a mere glimpse of the messiah visiting an unredeemed mundane world locked up in boredom and vulgarity, but in Grossman's fantasy, Shlomo discovers a vision of the murdered artist's lost manuscript *The Messiah*. We are left with premonitions that the artist's inspiration of an art that would yield a vision of a newly seen brightness and originality could end in disappointment and fetishism. Instead of an Age of Genius, the mythical time described by Schulz, when creativity becomes accessible to all, Shlomo in Grossman's novel is shocked to discover that "Bruno's" messiah is cruel and inhuman and that art does not liberate people but imprisons them. This pessimistic conclusion about the redemptive power of art is carried over into the figure of Shlomo's grandfather Anshel Wassermann, resurrected as an immortal Scheherazade and condemned to tell his fantasy stories of the Children of the Heart in a concentration camp, where no heroic band of adventurers delivers the good from the bad. In Shlomo's imagination, Anshel dreams up a creature called Kazik whose entire life spans 24 hours and is contained in "The Complete Encyclopedia of Kazik's Life."

The metafictional ploy here foregrounds the compulsion of telling the story but also the inevitable failure of the artist to tell it. The "encyclopedia" of the Holocaust comprises empty categories, such as "love," referring to the novel's title, a category that is apparently absent in the Holocaust as well as in Shlomo's own life. The entries of this fictional encyclopedia, ordered according to the Hebrew alphabet, demonstrate the failure of love and indeed the failure of art to redeem. Art (*omanut*) is cross-referenced with masturbation (*onanut*) to tell us that art promised no salvation: "in fact, it is his very freedom that deprives an artist of the comforting illusions and brings him closer to acknowledging the limitation of hope."³⁷ Kazik masturbated because, like the minuscule and emasculated men in Schulz's grotesque erotic drawings who cannot satisfy the dominant women who towered above them, he is stuck, just like Jonathan's grandfather in Foer's novel, in erotic fetishism. Kazik's miraculous 24-hour existence condemns him to a forlorn solitude. Grossman, searching for a language that would unlock the unimaginable world of "Over There," which was so present in his upbringing in Israel during and immediately after the Eichmann trial, finds in Schulz a secret fantasy that could similarly unlock the barred gates to the forbidden kingdom, that could cancel out the world which annihilated Schulz and his artistic vision. Grossman has to recreate "The Age of Genius,"

an age driven by the faith that life could be created over and over again through the power of imagination and passion and love, the faith that despair had not yet overruled any of these forces, that we had not yet been eaten away by our own cynicism and nihilism.³⁸

But inevitably Grossman, like Foer after him, represents the failure of art to redeem the traumatic memory of collective loss.

Ozick, it will be remembered, gave a rather different view of art and salvation in her essay “Innovation and Redemption: What Literature Means” (1971). Ozick took the position that the creative energy locked within the *yetser hara* (evil inclination) had the power to imagine the unimaginable, to penetrate evil. The possessive compulsion she depicts in her novel *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987) in Lars’s obsession with Bruno Schulz impedes instead of nurturing the individual talent struggling with the ghosts of literary paternity and haunted by the anxiety of influence. Postmodern art and literature are amoral in their refusal to judge evil, Ozick wrote; to evaluate a corn cob and the Holocaust as undifferentiated and indifferent aesthetic objects shows more than just cynicism. Ozick argued that the opposite of idolatry and the Greek notion of fate is salvation in the sense that art possesses the ability to change us and that it offers choices in its moral differentiation.³⁹ Following the postmodern divide between ethics and metaphysics, Grossman and Foer offer instead the aesthetic ecstasy of a Schulzian vision in a doomed world without salvation.

Contemporary writers such as David Grossman, Roberto Bolaño, Danilo Kiš, Aleksandar Hemon, Salman Rushdie, Cynthia Ozick, China Miéville, Philip Roth, Maxim Biller, and Nicole Krauss have grappled with the ghost of Schulz, whose influence can be explained by the postmodern writer’s fascination with the struggle of reinvention in the void after the Holocaust. Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010), a die-cast artwork that both recreates and erases Schulz’s 1934 story collection *Street of Crocodiles*, is a case in point. Their borrowings of Schulzian phantasmagoria are, Emily Budick acutely observed, examples of a ghostwriting of the past which produces illegitimate, fetishized idols (as Ozick warned) that cannot give birth to original literary offspring.⁴⁰ To claim originality would be a greater lie. In that sense, perhaps all writing is plagiarism, one of the metafictional themes of *The History of Love*. In the post-Holocaust imagination, a Schulzian fantasy accesses someone else’s traumatic memory and reclaims a literary heritage that represents the lost secular Jewish eastern Europe that is for Grossman and Foer more illusionary and counterfeit than real or familiar. The fixation on loss is paradoxically both redemptive in its attempt to find renewal in the present and anti-messianic in its despair of any such recovery. We remain stuck in melancholia, driven by a compulsive repetition of a horrific past that does not allow letting go and moving on, but requires belief in a romanticized mystification and the magical power of fiction to conjure an encrypted memory several times removed from history for those who have no personal experience of it, but wish to possess a past that can never truly be theirs.⁴¹

Bruno Schulz inspires both Foer and Krauss to imagine sexual love as the zest for life and the creative force that ensure survival against all odds, but also to believe in the transcendental power of the human imagination. Reading Bruno Schulz’s story “Father’s Last Escape” for a *New Yorker* podcast in 2012, Krauss commented that the Polish writer’s obsession with re-creation in his stories seemed to her a metaphor for his own artistic struggles and reinventions.⁴² That particular story is interestingly one that embodies a

family's repugnance at their father's slow dying. His metamorphosis into a crab was an escape from his failure in life, yet his presence remained in the room where he had lived, infecting the material surroundings with his likeness: the floral design in the wallpaper rearranges itself into his doleful smile. In the grotesque animation of the room with the father's characteristics, there is ambivalence about paternity and abhorrence at the treatment of the father who is accidentally boiled and served on a plate (there is no upsurge of vitality at the end as there is after the demise of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's story of a similar metamorphosis). In her novel *Great House*, Krauss echoes Schulz's ability to conjure what he called "the metaphysical core" out of the deceitful appearance of things and people, when she embodies the mysterious writing desk (which Varsky claims once belonged to Lorca) and other furniture with the lives it has lived, with a ghostly memory that haunts the protagonists in their search for meaning and in their lovemaking.

The "rhetoric of disaster," to borrow Michael Bernard-Donals's term (following Maurice Blanchot) for the troubling effects of the unknowable and the unrepresentable in writing about the historical trauma of the Holocaust,⁴³ determines a non-redemptive eschatology, not so different from many post-apocalyptic scenarios after 9/11 which describe a postmodernist loveless world lacking meaning or direction (one thinks, for example, of DeLillo's *Falling Man*). In the title story in Englander's *What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank*, the Holocaust displaces love when an assimilated American Jewish couple hosts old friends who have turned religious and moved to Israel; the story ends with their recalling their childhood game of survival, playing Anne Frank. The story raises several hot topics, none of which are resolved, chief among them the Jewish identity of American Jews. These debates are staged as polarities of religion versus ethnicity, Zionism versus anti-Zionism, exclusivity versus assimilation. Tellingly, the title of the story parodies Raymond Carver's canonical short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (in his 1981 collection of that name). It is clear by the end of Englander's story that the newly religious Jews have no more started anew than their secular counterparts in Florida.⁴⁴ In this distortion of Jewishness as fixated on the Holocaust, the story's protagonists are all still in hiding with Anne Frank. The Holocaust, not the founding of the State of Israel, has become the central, defining event of Jewish history in the minds of many secular Jews, a watershed in a disastrous universe filled with existential anxiety. In the next chapter, we will see a different perspective on the question of whether love can redeem traumatic loss in the relations of the individual and nation in stories of love that raise issues of betrayal and loyalty.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work, Volume 3: The Last Phase 1919–1939* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 236. Transliteration corrected.
- 2 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Standard Edition* 14 (1917): 224–25. See Alan L. Berger and Asher Z. Milbauer, "The Burden of Inheritance," *Shofar* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 64–85.

- 3 Krauss quoted in Berger and Milbauer, "The Burden of Inheritance," 66. See also Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 147–69.
- 4 See Joost Krijnen, *Holocaust Impiety in Jewish American Literature: Memory, Identity, (Post)Postmodernism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 66–67.
- 5 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, new edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 97–99. See Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "Creators of Worlds: The Deposition of R. Gamliel and the Invention of Yavneh," *AJS Review* 41, no. 2 (2017): 287–313. On the juxtaposition of Yavneh and Masada, see Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 46–54. See also Meir Ben Shahr, "Memories of the Destruction: Between Priests and Rabbis," in *Rethinking the Jewish War: Archeology, Society, Texts, and Traditions*, ed. Anthony Giambrone (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 199–235.
- 6 It is surely no coincidence that in *The History of Love*, Alma's parents first lived together in Kibbutz Yavneh and her brother, seized by messianic delusions that he is a *lamed-vavnik* on whom the existence of the world depends, wishes to go there in an act of *tikkun* (Berger and Milbauer, "The Burden of Inheritance," 75).
- 7 On the implications of this tentative conclusion for what she calls "American Holocaust theology," see Claire E. Sufrin, "Beyond the Chasm: Religion and Literature after the Holocaust," in *Thinking Jewish Culture in America*, ed. Ken Koltun-Fromm (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 131–55. For a more thorough discussion of post-Holocaust theology, see Michael Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 8 Nicole Krauss, *Great House* (London: Penguin, 2011), 279.
- 9 Krauss, *Great House*, 279.
- 10 I do not share Joost Krijnen's optimism that *Great House* ends with the recovery of love (*Holocaust Impiety*, 206–22).
- 11 Jessica Lang, "The History of Love, the Contemporary Reader, and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory," *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 43–56. As Lang notes, Krauss has vigorously denied that she wrote a "Holocaust novel."
- 12 For example, Efraim Sicher, *The Holocaust Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 13 See Emily Miller Budick, *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Krijnen, *Holocaust Impiety*, 107–10.
- 14 See Lee Behlman, "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction," *Shofar* 22, no. 3 (2004): 56–71; Krijnen, *Holocaust Impiety*, 183–84.
- 15 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 317–38; Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, eds., *Postmodernism and the Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).
- 16 Robert Eaglestone, *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 17 Sufrin, "Beyond the Chasm," 131–55.
- 18 Krijnen, *Holocaust Impiety*.
- 19 Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, 128–31.
- 20 Interview with John Mullen, "Jonathan Safran Foer on the Origins of *Everything Is Illuminated*," *Guardian*, March 20, 2010; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/mar/20/jonathan-safran-foer-everything-illuminated>.

- 21 Amy Hungerford, "How Jonathan Safran Foer Made Love," *American Literary History* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 607–24.
- 22 In addition to Isaac Bashevis Singer and Bruno Schulz, Krijnen mentions the influence of Gabriel García Márquez (*Holocaust Impiety*, 129).
- 23 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 94–95.
- 24 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 98.
- 25 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 177.
- 26 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 239.
- 27 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 201.
- 28 Eric L. Santner, "History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 144.
- 29 Jenni Adams, *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature: Troping the Traumatic Real* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 21–49. See also Caroline Rody, "The Magical Book within the Book: I. B. Singer, Bruno Schulz, and Contemporary Jewish Post-Holocaust Fiction," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier (Cham: Palgrave, 2020), 347–48.
- 30 Santner, "History beyond the Pleasure Principle," 147.
- 31 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 179.
- 32 Krijnen, *Holocaust Impiety*, 51–57.
- 33 Foer interviewed in Mullan, "Jonathan Safran Foer on the Origins of *Everything Is Illuminated*"; see Krijnen, *Holocaust Impiety*, 58–62, 195–206.
- 34 For a comparison of representation of the Holocaust in *The Shawl* and *Everything Is Illuminated*, see Mihai Mindra, "Narrative Constructs and Border Transgressions in Holocaust Literature within the American Context," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 28 (2009): 46–54.
- 35 David Grossman, "The Age of Genius: The Legend of Bruno Schulz," *New Yorker* June 8, 2009; <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/08/the-age-of-genius> accessed January 9, 2018.
- 36 Grossman, "Age of Genius."
- 37 See *Under: Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), 307.
- 38 Grossman, "Age of Genius."
- 39 Cynthia Ozick, *Art and Ardor: Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 244–48. See also Naomi Sokoloff, "Reinventing Bruno Schulz: Cynthia Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm* and David Grossman's *See Under: Love*," *AJS Review* 13, no. 1–2 (Spring–Autumn 1988): 171–99; Bruno Arich-Gerz, "Bruno Schulz's Literary Adoptees. Jewishness and Literary Father-Child Relationships in Cynthia Ozick's and David Grossman's Fiction," *European Judaism* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 76–89.
- 40 Budick, *Subject of Holocaust Fiction*, 127–45.
- 41 Budick, *Subject of Holocaust Fiction*, 134–35. On the metamorphoses of Bruno Schulz in contemporary post-Holocaust fiction, see Rody, "The Magical Book within the Book," 351–62; Kirstin Gwyer, "'You Think Your Writing Belongs to You?': Intertextuality in Contemporary Jewish Post-Holocaust Literature," *Humanities* 7, no. 20 (2018); <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7010020>. Gwyer applies Kristeva's understanding of intertextuality to read post-Holocaust fiction as a palimpsest in which it is difficult to discern an original text; I will return to the anxiety of influence here in the case of Kafka in Chapter 6.
- 42 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-podcast-nicole-krauss-reads-bruno-schulz>

- 43 Michael Bernard-Donals, "The Rhetoric of Disaster and the Imperative of Writing," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2001): 73–94; Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 14.
- 44 See Devorah Baum, *Feeling Jewish (a Book for Just About Anyone)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 140–44; Helene Flanzbaum, "Nathan Englander's 'Anne Frank' and the Future of Jewish America," in *New Directions in Jewish American and Holocaust Literatures: Reading and Teaching*, ed. Victoria Aarons and Holli Levitsky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 205–22.

3 Body and Nation

Nation as Body/Body as Nation

The land/woman trope has enjoyed a long history in Western culture, particularly in the conventional cartographic representation of a woman's body as land to be explored and penetrated as well as possessed or dispossessed, for example in Shakespeare and in John Donne's "Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed."¹ The trope is well known from the biblical description of the Land of Israel as a body that rejects the nation's sins as well as the people of Israel as a wayward woman in Hosea 2:7, but also as an abandoned wife who returns to her husband (Isaiah 54).² We have seen how the covenantal bond with the Land of Israel rooted in sacred texts is undermined in Zeruya Shalev's *Husband and Wife*. Indeed, the reconstitution of the space of the ancestral homeland as an alienating landscape turns on its head Hosea's parable of Jerusalem or Zion as an idolatrous and adulterous woman. The biblical trope has been sexualized, as Michal Govrin has shown in a lengthy treatise and in her fiction: Israel was often imagined as God's bride and Jerusalem was eroticized as a lover, but in postmodern fiction the erotic landscape is a woman's body.³

The erotic image of the Land of Israel as the body of a woman in *Song of Songs* has enjoyed a long exegesis as well as in artistic portraits of a woman as the landscape or map of Israel (for example, Michael Gross). We should not be surprised to see the appropriation of the body-nation trope to a subversive critique of the political landscape in contemporary Hebrew fiction. Besides Zeruya Shalev's *Sheerit hekhayim* (2011; *The Remains of Love*, 2013), to be discussed in Chapter 6, David Grossman's novel *Ishah borakhat mibSORah* (2008; *To the End of the Land*, 2010) illustrates an extended use of the trope for the feeling of internal exile and of not being able to reciprocate love, an infectious malaise, written during the Second Lebanon War in which Grossman lost one of his sons.

The subversion of the body-nation trope is nowhere better illustrated than in Israeli novelist Orly Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City* (1992), a parody of Tel Aviv society that gives an anti-romantic expression of a generation's disillusion in idealism.⁴ The demented Dolly compulsively operates on animals

and people to quell her anxiety about the spread of cancer (especially the cancer of valleys) that projects her nationalistic ideology. In this inversion of the biblical analogy of bodily and national spiritual health, Dolly acts out the moral indifference to the violence which the author clearly believes comes with conquest and occupation of the Land and leads to the complete disorientation of self and its alienation from the nation. A surreal urban landscape replaces national space and collective identity dissolves into personal dementia and exclusion. In a distorted and repulsive image of the sacrifice Israel has made in sending its sons to fight for the country, Dolly embodies a monstrous figure of the mother who sacrifices her child for the nation and carves the map of biblical Israel onto the back of her son.⁵ Israel's obsession with its territorial rights and with its security has often been presented as a painful self-inflicted punishment, no less painful than the inscription on the prisoner's back in Kafka's *Penal Colony*, which is written on the body but is illegible to the prisoner who cannot escape his sentence.⁶ Dolly says as she cuts into her son's body:

Drops of blood began welling up in the river beds cutting across the country. The sight of the map of the Land of Israel amateurishly sketched on my son's back gave me a *frisson* of delight. At long last I felt that I was cutting into the living flesh.⁷

This body-map is updated and enlarged even after the child is taken away from Dolly because of her maltreatment and abuse of him. As if to underscore leftist Israeli intellectuals' disassociation from their biblical heritage and from Zionism, the boy is a child of unknown parentage, whom Dolly has found in a dogcatcher's van. She is quite literally stuck with him on her back, just as she is stuck with her surreal life in Dolly City (a simulacrum of Tel Aviv) and in Israel's neurotic "situation" (*matsav*) under constant threat and attack. She is under pressure at all times to perform as a woman and as a mother, able neither to escape the burden of responsibilities she has taken upon herself nor to escape the psychic pain of the nation's self-inflicted wounds and the violence it has inflicted on Others.⁸

When the body of the nation is torn apart by love for the Other, and the Other has rival claims for the Land, the nation-body trope strains under the weight of ideological and personal conflicts. As Gil Z. Hochberg has argued, the hostility and animosity of Jews and Arabs in the Land of Israel binds them closely in a desire to overcome separatist thinking. Despite physical separation, they are bound by a stubborn intimacy of proximity and by imagining each other as Other.⁹ As this chapter will show, love relationships with Arabs put body into conflict with nation and bring into question loyalty to the state. Whether or not love can win out over politics and cross ethnic and territorial boundaries, the analogy of sex and history makes a complex and problematic case for the intertwining of the personal and the collective in the identity politics playing out in contemporary novels.

Biopolitics, Nation, Narrative

The First Lebanon War and the Second Intifada raised ideological and moral dilemmas for a generation born after the struggle for independence. It was as if their beloved country had betrayed the ideals for which they had fought. Moreover, the erasure of the diaspora past (*shelilat hagolah*) left a vacuum for post-Zionist dissolution of all narratives of identity. In accounting for the sense of peril and impending catastrophe in the fiction of Yoram Kaniuk, Michal Govrin, Orly Castel-Bloom, and Zeruya Shalev, Rose Levinson points to the rise of the political right from 1977 onward and the treatment of Palestinian Arabs as an explanation for the obsession with bodily shame, dysfunctional relationships, erratic behavior, confusion of victim and perpetrator, and marital breakdown in contemporary Israeli fiction.¹⁰ The disillusion with the Zionist dream, however, cannot be understood outside the framework of a postcolonial discourse that deconstructs the nation as a discredited myth and detaches the individual from both the collective and the family as an autonomous, sovereign being of no fixed national or ethnic identity. The intellectual elite on the left consequently found it difficult to identify with the national consensus following the collapse of the peace process, but also felt at odds with a materialistic society that encouraged people to think of themselves as individuals with private needs, as consumers with little responsibility for their fellow citizens.

Historian Yehuda Elkana's controversial article in *Haaretz*, "Bizkhit hashekhhahah" ("In Favor of Forgetting," 1988), called on Israelis to free themselves from existential anxieties associated with the Holocaust or Israel's siege mentality and look forward to the future. This call to be free of the burden of the past fits the postmodern view of alternate narratives as equivalent or equally suspect in shifting sands of multiple identities, including possibly irreconcilable claims such as the Palestinian Arab "right of return" and Israel's right to exist. Jewish American author Nathan Englander, for example, in his novel *Dinner at the Center of the Earth* (2017), gives a typically clichéd and distorted view of the Israel-Arab conflict as an endless cycle of pointless tit-for-tat reprisals that are spiraling into a future Armageddon driven by the blind messianism of religious Jews and generals like Ariel Sharon. Englander's novel, in fact, centers on an American Jew who spied for Israel and was now incarcerated in a secret prison cell somewhere in the desert after betraying his adopted country because of what he saw as its immoral conduct—a clear reference to the case of an alleged Mossad agent Ben Zygier, known as "Prisoner X," a dual Australian Israeli citizen who committed suicide in December 2010 after being kept in secret isolation in Ayalon Prison on espionage charges. This can be read as a parable of the situation in which Englander and other supporters of the Jewish state see themselves when they can no longer identify with its policies or objectives and are accused of betrayal (as was Israeli nuclear spy Mordecai Vanunu who claimed he acted in obedience to his conscience). The novel ends, rather

incredibly, with an impossible tryst between the beautiful Israeli delegate to the peace talks and the Palestinian Arab mapmaker on the negotiating team in a tunnel under the Gaza border. That reminds us of the “situation” in Etgar Keret’s stories, which similarly envisage no change and no bright future in a limbotopia, but which hold out hope for love. The underground tunnels (the Gazans’ supply route for arms and people as well as for attack) are here re-imagined as a steamy erotic route out of what Englander calls the limbo, the only space where Jew and Arab can join together.

Each of these lovers’ dreams of a victory depends on the familiar romantic delusion that love can win out over violence and war, a sort of sex therapy for nations at war. Yet there is a deeper, more disturbing presence in the collective consciousness of the threatening Arab who embodies a sexual fantasy, as in Amos Oz’s *My Michael*, where a woman in a loveless marriage fantasizes about Arab twin brothers, simultaneously menacing and alluring. The story of Arab-Jewish love is hardly new in Hebrew literature: one thinks for example of the novels of Sami Michael, such as *Khatsatsara bewadi (Trumpet in the Wadi, 1987)*, set in the 1980s in an Arab district of Haifa, which pairs a new immigrant from Russia with a young Arab woman who teaches him Hebrew, ironically inverting the homecoming plot. A. B. Yehoshua’s classic *Hameahev (1977; The Lover, 1977)*, set also in Haifa, relates the forbidden relationships between a married woman Asia and her lover Gabriel, between the married father Adam and his daughter’s friend, and between Adam’s daughter Dafi, a schoolgirl, and her Arab lover Naim, who works in Adam’s garage. When the film version came out in 1986, starring Michal Bat-Adam (who was also the director) and celebrated singer Yohoram Gaon, it caused a stir, mainly because of its favorable portrayal of extramarital relations. Yet Yehoshua captured the Yom Kippur War’s traumatic disruption of normalcy as well as the frustration of loveless marriage. In *Hakalah hameshakhret, (2001; The Liberated Bride, 2003)*, Yehoshua similarly uses a story of courtship and broken marriage to speak about the fraught but also passionate relations between the Jewish and Arab communities in Haifa which uncover family secrets. David Biale comments that the Arab in such romances “becomes the ambiguous sexual Other,” but threatens national and ethnic integrity.¹¹ That perception is reflected in media coverage of such mixed marriages since the 1990s, which, as in the scandalous public coupling of Zimri and the Midianite princess in the Bible, are perceived in religious and nationalist circles as a disastrous blow to the fundamental identity and values of the nation as well as imperiling its biological continuity. And, as in the story of Tristan and Isolde, passion pits loyalty to the state against loyalty to a lover. It is no coincidence that Ruth Wisse refers to Tristan and Isolde in her personal account of an adulterous affair by way of a parable of American Jews’ loyalty to Israel.¹² In the Bible, Esther and Yael used their feminine charms to get an enemy leader into bed, but often the seductive Jewess is a popular stock type that plays out the agonizing choices between loyalty to one’s country and to one’s lover. For example, in

a new twist on the Mata Hari plot in the thriller movie *The Operative* (USA/Israel, 2019), based on *Hamorah leanglit* (*The English Teacher*, 2016), a novel by Yiftach Reicher-Atir: a Mossad agent called Rachel works undercover as an English teacher in Teheran and falls for a local Muslim whom she was tracking; the love relationship leads to her mysterious disappearance. However, the real-life struggle between Israelis and Arabs over the same piece of land is too complex to be contained in such movies as *Kidon* (Israel, 2013), starring super-model Bar Refaeli as a seductive Mossad agent, based on the assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, co-founder of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades (a military wing of Hamas) in Dubai in 2010.

Jewish-Arab love is nevertheless an appealing and tempting story, spiced by the erotic charge of power relations between “oppressor” and “oppressed,” as we see in Dorit Rabinyan’s *Geder khaya* (2014; *All the Rivers*, 2017), a novel of forbidden love between Liat, an Israeli Jewish translator living in New York, and a Palestinian Arab from Hebron, the painter Hilmi, who seduces her and very quickly takes control of the relationship. The novel won the prestigious 2015 Bernstein Prize but was not selected for adoption in the Israeli school curriculum in 2016, a decision that sparked a political scandal over censorship.¹³ “Patriotic” clichés fill Liat’s mind with warnings about Arab predators who run off with Jewish women and force them into abusive marriage in their villages, but Liat does not heed the voices in her head telling her to stop a disastrous affair before it is too late. She gives in to her sexual hunger for Hilmi’s body, unwilling to let go of him. She is so infatuated that it is enough for him to nibble her nipple for her to go weak in the knees. Although the male chauvinism in Hilmi’s possessiveness toward Liat is clear from the start, our attention is turned to the all too obvious politicized tropes of occupation versus dispossession, juxtaposition of Liat’s privileged home near the sea with restrictions on travel between Hebron and Gaza, or the outrageous parallel of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Hamas. Liat feels somehow responsible for Hilmi when he is locked out of his apartment and shudders to think she served in the army when he was incarcerated in a military prison. The asymmetry of the equation cries out—there is little compassion for the victims of terrorism or traumatized children forced to sleep night after night in air-raid shelters. The mention of terror attacks serves instead to impress on Liat the impossibility of her Israeli family and friends accepting Hilmi, despite her conviction that not all Arabs should be labeled as terrorists and her belief in humanity without borders. At the same time, Liat’s Persian Jewish origins situate her as the orientalized Other as well as a mediator between Muslim and Western societies in the neutral or foreign space of America.

The dope-enhanced romantic idyll of two birds flying high above New York cannot last. Before returning to her own life in Israel, Liat must face the reality of her secret love which she hides from her friends and her family, who want her to settle down and marry a nice Jewish boy. She tries to reconcile her feelings for Hilmi with her inner sense of guilt and betrayal. Yet,

she is transfixed by the strangeness of her position, looking at her home from the vantage point of the Other. Watching a film made by Hilmi's brother in Ramallah, she exclaims:

How strange the reversal is—seeing us from outside, looking in from the neighbors' window, seeing ourselves from the hidden side of the mirror. To observe from here in New York what is visible to them in Ramallah. To stand in their place on the balcony, like on Mount Nebo, and to see Israel every single day, to see the Tel Aviv suburbs and our lives that proceed on the other side, self-confident, unaware, as if we had no reflection.¹⁴

The ideological agenda here exposes Israelis' blindness to the plight of the Palestinian Arabs and to their fury, even if Liat cannot avoid seeing her own home as a target of missiles.

The idealistic humanist agenda, in which Liat serves as a foil for liberal-progressive views, is unfortunately not balanced by a reciprocal understanding from the point of view of Hilmi, whom we see mainly feeling hurt by Liat's insensitivity and insisting there can be no two-state solution, that sooner or later Israelis must give up their country for a bi-national Palestinian state. The intimacy between Liat and Hilmi, in parallel with the intimate proximity of Ramallah and Tel Aviv, cannot bridge that unfathomable gap between two inseparable peoples, like two lovers locked in passionate struggle. Yet it is Liat, not Hilmi, who is required to make the emotional and psychological leap, who is told rather patronizingly by Hilmi's brother Wasim that "you Israelis" are brainwashed and can only repeat their fears of another Holocaust. Liat is expected to choose sides, to choose between her family, her tribal loyalty, and identification with the Other. We are nevertheless tempted to believe that, just as in Avot Yeshurun's line adapted from Ecclesiastes, in his poem "All the Rivers," which is excerpted in the epigraph to the novel and which Liat teaches Hilmi, all rivers run into one river and love will bring enemies together in the most intimate and human way possible.¹⁵ However, no doubt because of the author's awareness of the impossibility of this ideal in the present political reality, instead of the impossible reconciliation on a Tel Aviv beach, Hilmi drowns in the sea that can be only glimpsed from Ramallah. Although Hilmi can cross over into Liat's territory, their love is doomed. Liat is left with only a single snapshot to remember him.

A snapshot is a picture taken spontaneously, a "Kodak moment" of a momentous or emotional occasion that is otherwise lost, and in postmodernist fiction it is typically detached from larger narratives to enable us to view history and nation from a fragmented, personal angle. *Hevzekim* (2002; *Snapshots*, 2007) is the title of a novel by Michal Govrin which similarly tells the story of love between Jew and Arab. The narrative is based on notes and photographs left by Ilana (Lana) Tsuriel, an Israeli architect who dies in

an automobile accident in Europe. These snapshots record her adulterous love affair with Sayyid, a Palestinian Arab theater director, whose troupe mounted a performance of the *Naqba* that told the Palestinian Arab narrative of Israel's War of Independence. Like Liat's relationship with Hilmi, the romance explores the inner conflicts of a woman torn between the landscapes of Israel under rocket attack and the Arab villages on the other side of the security fence or abandoned in 1948. Lana mixes up the men in her life and cannot separate the claims to her heart and body or to the embryo in her womb. She decides that nobody owns the Land, which is, like her body and Hosea's harlot, claimed by adulterous lovers. God declared it was His—to give to Israel and not to be given away,—but Lana reinterprets the biblical verses to mean it was ownerless. She cannot forgive the Zionists, she explains to her Gentile lover Claude as he explores the topography of her naked body, because they severed the connection of the Land from its biblical sources. She tells him that the Bible makes the Jews' right to the Land conditional on observance of the sabbatical laws, when it was at rest, ownerless for the benefit only of the poor and needy. Lana herself has abrogated the obligations of the biblical laws and gone to live in Paris in self-imposed exile, yet she insists the Jews still need to fulfill the ethical demands of the Bible.

This is why, Lana explains, she is working on architectural projects that reconstruct Jewishness as nomadism, a postmodern and postcolonial understanding of the individual's relationship with space. At the center of these plans stands the symbol of the refuge in transit wandering in the desert, the *sukkah*, a temporary abode in which Jews traditionally celebrate the harvest festival, but here with added connotations of exile and mobility. The *sukkah* (a booth erected during the Sukkot festival) is a temporary space that does not so much replicate wandering as recall the abiding non-spatial Divine presence that accompanied the nation in the desert. It demonstrates the tensions between permanence and mobility, between the architectural materiality of Jewish homes and more pliable concepts of ethnicity.¹⁶

Ilana plans to locate her anti-monument on the Hill of Evil Counsel, where, the Christian scriptures relate, the Jewish elders decided to have Jesus crucified, and according to Islamic tradition, Abraham rested on the way to Mount Moriah (today, the Temple Mount). This is the former residence of the British High Commissioner and a compulsory stop on any Christian pilgrimage because it is topped by the Field of Blood, so named because it was purchased with the 30 pieces of silver which Judas reportedly received for betraying Jesus. The Hill of Evil Counsel is also the title of Amos Oz's 1978 novella which serves here as a model of the interweaving of personal and historical narratives with the topography of the city in the tense unrest of Jerusalem in 1946, as underground fighters prepared for statehood while the British tried to maintain order. To redeem the Hill of Evil Counsel from its bloody history, Ilana intends to rename it Sabbatical Hill in order to invoke the biblical commandment to let the land rest in the seventh year and to cancel debts, which Lana reinterprets as a call for universal justice.¹⁷ This

is where Govrin intervenes in the conventional relationship of place and space in Jewish and Israeli culture to create, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains (following Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*), a radical feminist reconfiguration of gendered space which reconceptualizes the ideological construction of space of the Promised Land by detaching it from a physical place. Instead, it is remapped in terms of the thinking of French theorist Michel de Certeau, who understands the experience of space as practice and walking as the mapping of the city, so that "place" can be subverted and its boundaries crossed in everyday human activity.¹⁸

Such a reconfiguration of place leads Lana to deconstruct Zionist yearning for land and transform it into something that is neither possession nor conquest (thus returning to a sort of nomadic exile, as we will see again in post-Zionist thinking in Chapter 5). In her enthusiasm for radical architecture and radical causes, Ilana exclaims:

If there's meaning at all to the return of the Jews to their land—that aberration in history—it's to make a new revolution in the concept of nationalism, reformulate the connection between nation and land, give up the passion to conquer, to own....¹⁹

The Land must be regarded, she urges, as transitory and as universal as the *sukkah*, a temporary dwelling which is dismantled and re-erected each year on the Feast of Tabernacles, with its messianic, utopian vision of all the nations coming together to Jerusalem. In her rehearsal of postcolonial and post-Zionist discourse, Govrin brings together the gendered body-land trope with the image of Jerusalem as an adulteress (with which we began this chapter), whose relations with many pagan idols matches the number of her lovers, who is open to the advances of any conqueror. For just as Ilana sees Jerusalem as ownerless (not the heritage of one tribe), so is her own liberated body:

She who belongs to nobody, nobody owns her [*lo be'ulah*]. She isn't possessed by any tribe. Wide open, abandoned. With long female delight pouring [*be'inug nashi zav memushakh*], given her by all who suck the abundant milk from her breasts, crowd into her lap....²⁰

Alongside this eroticization of the Land as a voluptuous woman's body, Lana connects abandonment of the Land with the Binding of Isaac, but in the context of refusal to make the sacrifice that Dolly obsessively makes in Castel-Bloom's novel. Entwined with Sayyid's body, she climaxes while thinking how his theater is shaping the identity of a nation. As the circumcised "tiger" penetrates her, she puts on in her terror (like Leda in W. B. Yeats's poem) the "knowledge that something definite was written in the bodies' lines on the white bed," and summons Freud's opposing forces of Eros and Thanatos in a line from Marina Tsvetaeva: "And now I know,

where love holds power, death approaches soon, like a gardener.”²¹ She addresses these lines, along with the rest of the “snapshots,” to her father, whose story of pioneer settlement in the Jezreel Valley (based on notebooks of the author’s father) intermingles with her own visions, her lovers’ trysts, and the unremitting violence of the Gulf War and later of the Second Intifada. Her father’s death in particular haunts her as a landmark of the difference between his path and hers, between two generations, the Zionist pioneers and the post-Zionist intellectuals who have tired of war and have chosen wandering and exilic nomadism as a paradoxical fulfillment of the vision of the generation of the pioneers.²² With the taste of Sayyid’s salty skin on her lips, she is torn between the narratives of the Jews, their wanderings, the siege of Jerusalem, and Yokhanan ben Zakkai’s rabbinical academy in Yavneh, and the narratives of the Palestinian Arabs, their wanderings and refugee camps, their defeat and defiance.²³ Yavneh here replaces Masada in the Zionist myth of defiance and self-sacrifice, which after the Oslo Accords came to be associated with suicidal fanaticism, yet Yavneh is reconstituted as a post-exilic and female space of intellectual inquiry without borders.

In both *All The Rivers* and *Snapshots* there is an embodied understanding of the Israel-Arab conflict from the point of view of a sensuous woman who “sleeps with the enemy.” There is, however, no resolution, and each of these novels ends in death, with the cancelling out after the Gulf War and the Second Intifada of utopian dreams of universal peace. All that is left are snapshots—of Liat’s love for Hilmi, of Lana’s memories of her father, a veteran of Israel’s wars and a believer in love of Zion. The snapshots are both literal and symbolic, a photographic record of lost love and lost dreams as well as of passionate emotions and a passionate struggle between lovers over the same land.

The love affair between an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian Arab has become a metaphor for ending the conflict and making peace, though Amos Oz pleaded that the two-state solution to the Israel-Arab conflict meant a divorce, not love.²⁴ Hella Bloom Cohen has proposed however that the literary representations of interfaith love in Israeli Hebrew and Arabic literature are a litmus test for the viability of an Israeli identity that negates the Jewish identity of the state and rejects the institutionalization of marriage based on separation of religious communities. Miscegenation is a literary stratagem that resists conformity with endogamy or what Hella Bloom Cohen calls “race politics.”²⁵ What these novels have in common is a wish to break through the barriers of hatred and mistrust that have grown out of interethnic violence and war, to refuse to be enemies.²⁶

“Sleeping with the Enemy”

Contemporary Hebrew fiction has tried to make space for others in the conceptualization of place by including Israeli Arabs, *mizrakhi* writers, or Ethiopian Jews.²⁷ The love plot in particular made space in the imagination

for the Other, whether the Iraqi Jew (*mizrakhi* or “Arab Jew”), who felt culturally and socially excluded, or the Arab “enemy,” whose sympathetic viewpoint represents a startling revelation of Israel as someone else’s homeland. In Eli Amir’s Hebrew novel *Yasmin* (2005), for example, Arab-Jewish love destabilizes the borders of Israeli national identity after the 1967 reunification of Jerusalem.²⁸ The forbidden love of Israeli and Arab has emerged as a literary subgenre, very often between a Jewish woman and a Palestinian Arab man (possibly because, David C. Jacobson suggests, Israeli men are more likely to have stronger prejudices and come into contact with Palestinian Arabs in an empowered position).²⁹ First-time author Ronit Agam’s *Shvuyah ben ‘olamot* (*Captive between Worlds*, 2018) tells of a religious female soldier kidnapped by terrorists, who falls in love with one of her captors, by whom she becomes pregnant. Quite improbably, her kidnapper seeks her forgiveness and restores her to her family, but, at her mother’s suggestion, she stays with her husband and children, agreeing to meet her mother regularly at the border crossing. Agam wants us to believe Rachel’s predicament “between two worlds” is one that can be solved through love and acceptance on both sides. Such idealism conveys the dilemma of a Jewish woman torn between her family and the man she loves, between faith and romance, but it can also be a parable of the larger impasse of the Israel-Arab conflict over the same land, symbolized by a woman caught between conflicting claims.

The story does not usually end so happily ever after. In American Israel author Moriel Rothman-Zecher’s debut coming-of-age novel *Sadness Is a White Bird* (2018), a young man returns to Israel after being brought up in the United States and becomes involved with Arab twins, Nimreen and Laith, the daughter and son of his mother’s friend in the peace movement in Haifa. Jonathan’s intimate knowledge of the Other creates conflicts of loyalty and betrayal and he lands up in a military jail. He cannot easily resolve the contradictions between freedom (sexual as well as political) and “occupation” and cannot reconcile his relations with the Arab twins and his duties as a conscripted soldier. During his military service, he has to put down a riot in an Arab village, during which Laith is injured. Jonathan cannot square his conscience with the orders he has to carry out. He finds himself on the opposing side to his Arab friends, with whom he used to enjoy smoking a joint and having fun. Now he is an enemy in uniform, and his love affair with Nireem seems to him a lost dream because the Israeli and Arab narratives clash. The story of his own grandfather’s survival of the Holocaust as a Sephardi Jew in Saloniki and the story of Nimreen’s grandmother’s loss of her young husband in 1948 each implacably and irreconcilably exclude the other. In his confessional memoir addressed to Laith, Jonathan can only issue a primal scream of despair in his prison cell at his failure to bridge that divide. Rothman-Zecher, a former Israeli conscientious objector resident in the United States, offers no solutions and can only express frustrated rage at the intransigence of both sides in the Israel-Arab conflict.

The children of these unhappy romances tell their story of marital strife and displacement in *Ishmael's Oranges* (2014) by Claire Hajaj, a Beirut-based British Jewish novelist born of an Israeli woman previously married to a Palestinian Arab. Her novel tells the story of Ishmael's dispossession in 1948 and the discovery of love in swinging London in the 1960s with a young Jewish woman, before they are wrenched apart by political fights and conflicting loyalties; their children grow up in Middle Eastern battlegrounds on both domestic and regional fronts.³⁰ Raised in Arizona by her Jewish mother and Palestinian father, Hannah Lillith Assadi's award-winning first novel *Sonora* (2017) tells of the daughter of a Jewish-Palestinian Arab couple growing up in the Arizona desert who flees the ghosts of her parents' past as well as the sex-and-drugs scene which claims the lives of her schoolfriends and her bisexual lover Laura. In both these novels, Arab-Jewish marriages prove unworkable because neither side is willing to yield their narrative, and the children of such unions suffer in consequence.

Sympathy for the Arab side of the conflict has persisted in Israeli leftist politics and in Hebrew literature since S. Yizhar's stories of the Israeli War of Independence, "Hashavui" ("The Prisoner") and *Khirbet Khizeh*, in which the erotic associations of "penetration" and "conquering" serve to deny the violence rather than to overcome it.³¹ The production of desire is a function of the power structures in relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, a situation where sexual excess can result from perceptions of hierarchies of dominance. Attempts to open a personal dimension that overcomes collective enmity threaten stable identities with perceptions of miscegenation.³² Imagining intimacy across national, religious, and ethnic boundaries nevertheless creates possibilities, however fantastic they seem, of overcoming the barriers of an apparently irresolvable conflict by establishing individual relations beyond collective identities. Yet it proves difficult to move beyond entrenched positions and mutual misperceptions or to overcome fears induced by a violent reality and anxieties conditioned by cultural constructions. The popularity of such Romeo and Juliet romances in Israeli cinema in the 1980s, Yosefa Loshitzky explains, tells us much about the sexual politics and ideology of post-Zionism. By shifting a violent conflict into the intimacy of human relationships, such narratives bring the larger tragedy into the realm of individual lives, which connect intimately through sex, thus challenging mutual hatred and prejudices and questioning received notions of home and territory. The Arab male is depicted in harmony with nature, an orientalized figure, and the viewer of these romances easily identifies with the Romeo and Juliet story of two Others, a racialized and a gendered minority in Israeli society. The inevitable ending of devastation and death conveys a simplistic political message about the moral implications of colonization of the Land.³³ The roles of victim and perpetrator are challenged, as Arabs and Jews vie for control of the official narrative of the inception of the nation but also fight passionately for its body.

Betrayal of the Land, Betrayal in Love

Returning to the anthropomorphic trope of Israel as a woman, I conclude this chapter by considering how betrayal of self and nation is grounded in the act of love, both metaphorically and literally. The Promised Land is still tempting as a woman's body in British Jewish novelist Clive Sinclair's *Blood Libels* (1985), yet his anti-hero Jake fails to act like his idol Orde Wingate when the Jews are again victims of pogroms. Jake's lust for another "promised land"—the German *au pair*—represents the diaspora Jew's inescapable Auschwitz syndrome and reveals an envy of the empowered Aryan woman, but also reflects a love-hate relationship with Israel after the First Lebanon War (Operation Peace for Galilee). The attitudes of American Jewish intellectuals to Israel have ranged from the ambivalence of Saul Bellow's *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976) to the enthusiastic defense of the Jewish State by Alan Dershowitz and others.³⁴ Israeli novelists such as Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua are popular and there has been dialogue, for example, Philip Roth's conversations with Aharon Appelfeld and Etgar Keret's with Nathan Englander, yet there remains a perception of dichotomy between Israeli and Jewish American writers. Oz and Yehoshua, for example, have repeatedly criticized diaspora Jews as inferior and less complete than Israeli Jews.³⁵ Indeed, historian Eli Lederhendler insists that for Chabon, Foer, Englander, and Krauss, Israel is primarily a placeholder by which they orientate conflicted Jewish American identities in their fiction. Israel is, in his opinion, no more real in their work than Rushdie's "imaginary homeland," yet it is crucial to their self-definition as Jewish Americans who resist being confined to any essentialized identity and certainly not one with political overtones. They are wary of accusations of dual allegiance to a foreign state that claims them as kith and kin, especially amid an often hostile and acrimonious debate over Zionism and in the aftermath of the Pollard affair.³⁶ Even if, as I noted in the Introduction, American Jews are divided over Israel's policies, their overall identification with the Jewish state is not reflected in the disaffiliation or disassociation we see in contemporary Jewish American novels.

Some Jewish American authors have given an estranged view of Israel seen by someone who used to live there, for example, Naama Goldstein's *The Place Will Comfort You* (2004) and Miriam Libicki's autobiographical comic *Jobnik!: An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army* (2008) or her graphic essay *Toward a Hot Jew* (2016). The female central protagonist Yona Stern, in Joan Leegant's *Wherever You Go* (2010), is symptomatically estranged from her Israeli sister who lives in a religious settlement. Everything is presented in black-and-white caricatures: confused American Jews are depicted as coming to Israel in order to sort out their spiritual crises, only to be repelled by what is presented as extremist intransigence and fanaticism. A more committed view is Risa Miller's prosaic tale of the trials and tribulations of Modern Orthodox American Jewish settlers in her

novel *Welcome to Heavenly Heights* (2003), which ends with the death of a child and a woman soldier in a terrorist attack on a bus, an incident that tests faith in Divine providence in bringing the Jewish people back to their ancestral homeland. American Jews came back to their ancient homeland because they always believed this is what they must do (although it is not easy to give up on their American-brand toiletries).

The ambivalent or conflicted attitudes toward Israel tell a story of similarly ambivalent or conflicted postmodern love in Margot Singer's collection of connected stories *The Pale of Settlement* (2007), winner of a Flannery O'Connor prize for short fiction, partly set in Israel in the period from the First Lebanon War to the Second Intifada. Susan Stern is a naïve New Yorker whose parents grew up in Israel and whose grandparents and cousins live there still. Singer's stories present the outsider's view of Israel and Israelis from the point of view of a young woman easily or willingly seduced, who looks back at the mistaken trust and deluded hopes which she invested in both Israel and love. The estranged view is conveyed in the sense of Israel as a dangerous place where people go about their daily business regardless of the violence and danger on their doorsteps. Israeli men, stereotypically macho, say "tsk, tsk" to make Susan feel she does not really understand how things are. Yet these Israeli men generally seem to have lost any Zionist vision, and Susan fails to form a sustainable relationship with any of them. Gavi in "Helicopter Days," for example, does not experience battle fatigue or shell shock but joins a foreign cult and ends up in breakdown and divorce. Dubi (in "Borderland") abuses Arabs at the Gaza checkpoint to show he can cross borderlines, as he also does when he steals into Susan's Nepal hotel room at night, films her sleeping, and pockets her watch, an heirloom from her grandmother. To imagine an Israeli who steals a young American Jewish woman's heirloom suggests a subconscious grudge at having one's identity usurped or coerced, but this enticing plot line is dropped, and we do not hear again of Dubi or the watch. It proves to be just another disconnection with Israelis and with Israel.

As in *The Remains of Love*, political discourse about Israel is tied to postmodern love when Susan discovers that sex is like an explosion of a terrorist bomb, leaving "exit wounds" (to borrow the title of Rutu Modan's graphic novel, also about the scars of love and terrorism). Susan retraces the steps of her grandmother, a typical *yekke*, who managed to get out of Nazi Germany with her husband and lived for many years in an apartment with a panoramic view of Haifa Bay. Yet, Susan is also retracing her own steps, trying, at 33 and unmarried, to see where she went wrong in her love life. This is why she invents for her grandmother a brief adulterous affair like the one she once had. She believes that, in an inverse relation of history and sex, desire will still rise with the metaphorical smoke from ruins of a razed Canaanite or Palestinian Arab village, echoing the dreams of reconciliation through love with the enemy we saw earlier in this chapter. Conversely, the reunification of Berlin does not reunite her with her ex-boyfriend. Later,

we see her looking out of her Manhattan apartment, watching a male exhibitionist in a neighboring tower. Her response to this desperate plea for love and sex is to finger herself at the window. It seems her difficulties in maintaining a truly mutual relationship in postmodern New York relate, in the history/sex analogy, to her reticence about committing herself to relationships, in particular to Israel and Israelis.

Conscious of being the tourist struggling to go beyond clichés, Susan maintains a dry, factual narration that does not allow for any real understanding of complex issues, and the polyphony of other voices does not resolve conflicting versions of the national narrative and of collective memory. As Susan's uncle Avraham, a retired archeologist, puts it, referring to the arguments of revisionist scholars over the truth of the Bible and the competing claims to the Land, "The problem was that the evidence could be read so many ways. Any argument was just supposition piled on supposition. A house of sand."³⁷ Indeed, Susan the journalist has us wonder if we will ever know what happened in Deir Yassin or in Jenin. The same postmodernist relativism applies to Susan's reconstruction of her family history and her own identity. She concludes her love story (after an affair with a married man called James O'Reilly) with a meditation on the Hebrew term for fiction "bidayon," a falsehood or lie: "You never could tell which parts of stories people had made up, Susan knew. People told you what they needed to believe."³⁸ This is one answer to the question I ask in this book, about how the postmodern treatment of truths and narratives affect personal and collective identities.

Such relativity contrasts with the fervent principles of Baruch (Boris) Kotler in a rather different story of love and betrayal of a woman and of a nation in Russian American Jewish novelist David Bezmozgis's novel *The Betrayers* (2014). Kotler, a former Soviet dissident and an Israeli national hero (modeled on Natan Sharansky), risks both his political career and his marriage when he opposes Arik Sharon's plan for unilateral withdrawal from the Gush Katif settlements in the Gaza Strip. Despite being morally compromised, he refuses to be blackmailed, and his affair with a younger woman, a family friend, is made public. Coming face to face with the man who once betrayed him to the KGB and who was responsible for his being sent to the Gulag, Baruch realizes that, as Ecclesiastes said, there is no man on earth who has not sinned, and concludes that manipulation can be far stronger than individual conscience or beliefs. Kotler's son Ben-Zion refuses to listen to his father's advice and refuses orders to evict Jews from their homes rather than betray his convictions. In the novel's coda, Baruch returns to Israel in disgrace, in a different mind and mood from his triumphant welcome 25 years previously, yet we see Zion is still the desired destination, the site of the rebirth of the Jewish people that has risen from Soviet oppression, pogroms, and Nazi genocide. Nevertheless, the idealists are all too human in their faults and not above suspicion of playing fake roles. Betrayal, both in sex and in politics, goes back to King David, and like the

Psalmist, Baruch has to forgive and accept forgiveness. Bezmozgis here, as in his debut comic novel about dislocated ex-Soviet Jews in transit in Italy, *The Free World* (2011), presents Israel as a divided camp, where messianic rabbis are trying to capture lost souls. Jews seem to get along only when they are in a limbotopia: in transit, on an airplane, or abroad. Yet we see once more that betrayal in love cannot be separated from betrayal of the Land, but the relationship is fraught with complex conflicts and ambiguities, especially when seen from the viewpoint of the American Jews whose families emigrated from the former Soviet Union.

Postmodern love challenges faith in ideals and loyalty to a land, but it also foregrounds the crisis of religious faith among women who leave religious homes and discover sex, or who seek a way to God when lost in the solitude of a misogynist, materialist society which envisages no future beyond the gratification of the moment. I now turn to novels by Israeli and American Jewish women who have made the journey from religion or have returned to it.

Notes

- 1 See Susanne Schulz, *Body Narratives: Writing the Nation and Fashioning the Subject in Early Modern England* (New York: St Martin's, 2000), 149–72; Laura Tommaso, "'Th' Receiving Earth': Shakespeare and the Land/Woman Trope," *Textus* 18 (2005): 267–82; see also Ilana Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 66–95. I will return to the trope of the Land of Israel as a woman's body in Chapter 6.
- 2 See Alice A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
- 3 Michal Govrin, *Yerushalayim mekom hataavah: mas'a el hamitos [Jerusalem, the Place of Desire: A Journey to the Myth]* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz hameukhad, 2019).
- 4 See Gershon Shaked, "Contemporary Israeli Literature and the Subject of Fiction: From Nationhood to the Self," in *Ideology and Jewish Identity in Israeli and American Literature*, ed. Emily Miller Budick (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 110–12; Karen Grumberg, "Female Grotesque: Orly Castel-Bloom and the Israeli Woman's Body," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 23 (Spring–Fall 2012): 145–68; Todd Hasak-Lowy, "Post-Zionism and Its Aftermath in Hebrew Literature: The Case of Orly Castel-Bloom," *Jewish Social Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 86–112. On Castel-Bloom's satire of Israel's turn from the collective welfare state to neo-liberal consumerism, see Shir Alon, "Neoliberal Riskscapes and Preemptive Poetics in Orly Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City*," *Comparative Literature* 71, no. 1 (2019): 1–18. On the maladjustment of Castel-Bloom's characters, who feel out of place and insecure in Israeli society, see Karen Grumberg, *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 76–122.
- 5 Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 87–95.
- 6 On the body as a political trope in *Dolly City*, see Adia Mendelsson-Maoz, "On Human Parts: Castel-Bloom and the Israeli Extreme," in *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, ed. Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), 164–69; Mendelsson-Maoz, *Borders, Territories, and Ethics: Hebrew Literature in the Shadow of the Intifada* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2018), 101–19.

- 7 Orly Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City* (London: Loki Books, 1997), 44; *Doli siti* (Tel Aviv: Zmora Betan, 1992), 29.
- 8 For a comparison of *Dolly City* with the satirical devices of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, see Rose L. Levinson, *Death of a Holy Land: Reflections in Contemporary Israeli Fiction* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 23–36.
- 9 Gil Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- 10 Levinson, *Death of a Holy Land*, xi–xviii.
- 11 David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 201–02.
- 12 Ruth R. Wisse, *If I Am Not for Myself: The Liberal Betrayal of the Jews* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 203–05.
- 13 On this controversy, see Mendelson-Maoz, *Borders, Territories, and Ethics*, 171–72. The book was never “prohibited” as Mendelson-Maoz states. However, the debate centered not on the book’s literary merits but on its positive description of Jewish-Arab love that was felt in some political circles to threaten the integrity of the Jewish people through intermarriage and assimilation. In the furor that followed, Peace Now supporters declared their refusal to be enemies and organized a photo shoot of Jews and Arabs kissing each other. If anything, Rabinyan’s novel helped publicize the dilemmas of mixed Jewish-Arab couples and the divide between the two communities; see Janan Bsoul, “There’s Nothing Progressive About Jews and Arabs Kissing,” *Haaretz*, January 14, 2016; <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-jews-and-arabs-kissing-is-not-progressive-1.5390188>.
- 14 Dorit Rubinyan, *All the Rivers*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New York: Random House, 2017), 145; *Geder khaya* (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 2015), 191.
- 15 Rubinyan, *All the Rivers*, 146–59; *Geder khaya*, 192–210. For the full text of Yeshurun’s poem, see *New Republic*, February 12, 2008; <https://newrepublic.com/article/104173/all-the-rivers>.
- 16 See Miriam Lipis, “A Hybrid Place of Belonging: Constructing and Siting the Sukkah,” in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 26–41.
- 17 Michal Govrin, *Hevzekim* (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 2002), 90–93; *Snapshots*, trans. Barbara Harshav (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 72–74. Adia Mendelson-Maoz compares *Snapshots* with Ronit Matalon’s *Sarah (Bliss)*, both stories of triangular relationships involving an Arab man (*Borders, Territories, and Ethics*, 145–69). See also Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 160–68. For Govrin’s own account of the utopian project of the Sabbatical Hill in the real topography of Jerusalem, see her *Yerushalayim mekom hataavah*, 193–200.
- 18 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenann, “Place, Space, and Michal Govrin’s *Snapshots*,” *Narrative* 17, no. 2 (May 2009): 220–34.
- 19 Govrin, *Hevzekim*, 95; *Snapshots*, 76.
- 20 Govrin, *Hevzekim*, 142; *Snapshots*, 114. The English does not quite capture the eroticism of this explicit description of orgasm and the play in Hebrew of ownership and fornication.
- 21 Govrin, *Hevzekim*, 105; *Snapshots*, 85. The poem is “Still yesterday he met my gaze” (1920), and bemoans the plight of a woman torn between lovers; Govrin has altered the sense of the line she quotes: “Where love abandons, Death-the-Gardener steps in” (my literal translation).
- 22 On Govrin’s novel as “nomadic art,” see Mendelson-Maoz, *Borders, Territories, and Ethics*, 157–64.

- 23 Bringing together these two narratives is a familiar refrain of post-Zionist discourse; see, for example, Rachel F. Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2003).
- 24 Amos Oz, *Help Us to Divorce: Israel and Palestine between Right and Right* (London: Vintage, 2004).
- 25 Hella Bloom Cohen, *The Literary Imagination in Israel-Palestine: Orientalism, Poetry, and Biopolitics* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 57–59, 153.
- 26 There are no statistics for real-life mixed Israeli Jewish and Arab couples in Israel, where they often experience stigmatization and occasionally public protest; for analysis of media discourse surrounding one such “mixed marriage” in summer 2014, see Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui, “Sleeping with the ‘Enemy’: Mixed Marriages in the Israeli Media,” *Journal of Israeli History* (2017): 213–28; <https://doi.org/10.1080/13531042.2018.1545820>; online December 20, 2018. A sociological study of Muslim and Christian women married to Jewish men in Israel concludes that the women seek social betterment and educational opportunities but meet non-acceptance from the surrounding society; see Maha Karkabi-Sabbah, “Ethnoreligious Mixed Marriages among Palestinian Women and Jewish Men in Israel: Negotiating The Breaking of Barriers,” *Journal of Israeli History* 36, no. 2 (2018): 189–211; <https://doi.org/10.1080/13531042.2018.1541530>; online December 20, 2018.
- 27 See Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 123–57; Adia Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel: Literary Perspectives* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2014).
- 28 See Barbara E. Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 38–40.
- 29 David C. Jacobson, “Intimate Relations between Israelis and Palestinians in Fiction by Israeli Women Writers,” *Shofar* 25, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 35–36.
- 30 For examples of Arab-Jewish love in Hebrew novels by women in the late twentieth century, see Jacobson, “Intimate Relations between Israelis and Palestinians,” 32–46. For a Palestinian Arab perspective, see Cohen, *The Literary Imagination in Israel-Palestine*, 153–74; Sarah Irving, “Love as a Peace Process?: Arab-Jewish Love in the Anglophone Palestinian Novels of Naomi Shihab Nye and Samir El-Youssef,” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 39–49. Hochberg considerably problematizes the parallel of personal and national narratives in his reading of love stories by Maalouf and Darwish (*In Spite of Partition*, 121–37), while Dalya Cohen-Mor in *Mahmoud Darwish: Palestine’s Poet and the Other as the Beloved* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) discusses the violation of the taboo of Jewish-Arab love in the poetry of Darwish, some of which is dedicated to an Israeli Jewish woman “Rita,” an affair which ended (unlike the Romeo and Juliet story) with bitter parting over rival allegiances and loyalties.
- 31 Hannan Hever, *Hebrew Literature and the 1948 War* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 78–79. See also Eshel, *Futurity*, 109–20. Eshel notes that Yizhar in *Khirbet Khizeh* re-scripts scripture in casting the Israelis as King Ahab in the story of Nabot’s vineyard, in 1 Kings 21, with the Arabs as their victims, thus deserving the Divine wrath visited on the Kingdom of Israel (*Futurity*, 8–9).
- 32 Hella Bloom Cohen, *The Literary Imagination in Israel-Palestine: Orientalism, Poetry, and Biopolitics* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 33 Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 112–68. Other such films have followed, including Alain Zaloum’s *David and Fatima* (2008), which gives the Romeo and Juliet plot

- a tragic ending in the love story of an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian Arab woman. A play set in an Israeli interrogation cell, *Ali and Dahlia* (2019) by Tariq Jordan, who grew up Jewish and Muslim in Manchester, England, also charts the romance of a Jewish woman and an Arab man against the background of the difficulties crossing political and security barriers.
- 34 See Andrew S. Furman, *Israel through the Jewish-American Imagination: A Survey of Jewish-American Literature on Israel, 1928–1995* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Naomi Sokoloff, “Israel in the Jewish American Imagination,” in *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 362–78. For a range of different views about Israel among American Jewish intellectuals and writers, see Alan Dershowitz, et al., *What Israel Means to Me* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2006); Ranen Omer-Sherman, *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press / University Press of New England, 2002).
- 35 *The A. B. Yehoshua Controversy: An Israeli-Diaspora Dialogue on Jewishness, Israeliness, and Identity*, ed. Noam Marans and Roselyn Bell (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006). For statements by Israeli and Jewish American authors, see Richard Siegel and Tamar Sofer, eds., *The Writer in the Jewish Community: An Israeli-North American Dialog* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/London: Associated University Presses, 1993). See also Olga Zambrowski, *American Jewish Literature and the Israeli Reader* (New York: Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations of the American Jewish Committee/Ramat-Gan: Argov Institute for the Study of Israel and the Jewish People of Bar-Ilan University, 1994); special issue on “Israel and America: Cross-Cultural Encounters and the Literary Imagination,” *Shofar* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1998).
- 36 Eli Lederhendler, “Israel and America in Jewish American Writing,” in *The New Jewish American Literary Studies*, ed. Victoria Aarons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 59–73.
- 37 Margot Singer, *The Pale of Settlement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 120.
- 38 Singer, *Pale of Settlement*, 211.

4 Transgression and Return

From Rubies to Rebels and Back Again

Turning now to femininity and feminism, this chapter discusses how contemporary Jewish women writers have engaged with religious beliefs and practices in ways that pit sexual liberation against modesty or women's roles as dutiful wives and mothers—the stereotyped Woman of Valor, whose “price is far above rubies” (Proverbs 31:10). I will be looking at women who have left their religious community, but also at those who return to Judaism. In liberating themselves as women, some Jewish feminists have rebelled against the Jewish family's “patriarchal” rules of modesty, which they regard through internalized stereotypes as primitive or anachronistic and which they perceive as inhibiting fulfillment of their sexuality.¹ Yet, besides the differences between communities from the *masorti* and Conservative to the *haredi* and Hasidic, it would be a mistake to adopt a dichotomy of religious/non-religious in attitudes among religious women to dress codes, hair covering, and the female body. The complex relations of feminist and religious identities must be understood as screened through ideological filters, not to mention social pressures in society at large on how women dress and behave.² Feminist Jewish writers have resisted being straitjacketed as “JAPs” or obedient wives, or necessarily marrying and bearing children, but often project stereotypes in American popular culture.³

The feminist assault on Judaism as the source of patriarchal repression of women, which regulates their sexuality and dress and imposes gender segregation, is well known, not least from media coverage of “chained wives” (*agumot*) and segregated public spaces or demonstrations and counterdemonstrations over egalitarian conditions for women. All too often religious Jewish women are cited as the prime example of an atavistic repressive religion that has no place in modernity and that imprisons women in an intolerable marriage, slaves to their husbands and burdened with domestic chores. These stereotypes appear in movies such as Boaz Yakin's *Price above Rubies* (1998), Amos Gitai's *Kadosh* (1999), or Josh Appignanesi's *Song of Songs* (2005), which are manipulative and provocative in their scandalous exposure of the “secret” lives of religious Jews.⁴ Fantasies about sex

through a hole in a sheet or voluptuous sex-starved *haredi* women continue to circulate (as in Larry David's outrageous 2016 "Anna from the Dry Cleaner's" sketch).⁵ Recently, religious women filmmakers have given a more nuanced and balanced view, and a number of documentaries, such as *Shekinah: The Intimate Life of Hasidic Women* (Canada, 2014), shatter the stereotypes of religious Jewish women as inferior and show that they might not want to be liberated by feminists eager to tear off the veil from repressed minorities (whether they wish or not). Orthodox women filmmakers have discussed issues of faith, love, childbearing, and emotional crisis without breaking the modesty rules and certainly without explicit sex scenes—one thinks of Dina Perlstein's *Thin Ice* (2012) and *Right to Silence* (2017) or Rama Burshtein's *Fill the Void* (2012) and *The Wedding Plan* (2016) as well as productions of the religious Zionist Ma'ale film school such as *Shetizki (Blessed)*, (2010).⁶ Around the world, Jewish women have abandoned the hedonism of postmodern society and returned to religion. The religious women's novels discussed in this chapter offer love stories quite different from the tales of pain and sorrow we have seen so far but plot the ups and downs of doubt and faith without shying away from discussing sex and sexuality.⁷ In doing so, they give voice to views not usually heard in mainstream culture.

The *frummers*, religious Jews who maintained their distinctive Jewish dress and live according to *halakhah* (Torah law), received a bad press in Jewish American culture. "Modern" American Jews were advised to keep away from them, whether out of fear of being brainwashed into rejection of their comfortable American middle-class lifestyle or out of fear that the *haredim* would take over the American Jewish community, which had achieved a great measure of assimilation and invisibility. Roth's "Eli the Fanatic" satirized American Jews who rejected the *haredi* refugee from the Holocaust because his "blackness" disturbed their hard-won assimilation in White suburbia. Yet the passage from the Old World to the tough streets of America continued to be portrayed as a legacy that brutalized the men and turned the women into whores (for example, in Hugh Nissenson's *My Own Ground*).⁸ By contrast, Ruchama King's *Seven Blessings* (2003) places the doubts and questions of newly religious Modern Orthodox American Jews in Jerusalem firmly within Torah Judaism and adherence to marriage and family.

Stereotyping religious Jews as beyond the pale of a shared humanism and as rejecting modernity can be explained as part of the secular writer's self-invention in the face of anti-Semitism by disassociating from the "extremism" and "fanaticism" of the "bad" unassimilated Jews. Alternately, disrespectful portrayals of religious types are simply mischievous fun not to be taken seriously, just as religion is not to be taken seriously. Either way, Michael Chabon and Tova Reich are two contemporary Jewish American authors who caricature Orthodox Judaism, but they are less knowledgeable than *maskil* satirists such as Joseph Perl at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In her cynical satire of repentance and general ridicule of religion in her novels *Master of the Return* (1985) and *One Hundred Philistine*

Foreskins (2013), Reich has nothing but mocking scorn for messianic Zionists, followers of Rabbi Kook or Shlomo Carlebach, and such body-and-soul practitioners of alternate spirituality as Yemima Avital. Indeed, the renegade apostate Nechama in Reich's *My Holocaust* (2007), who retreats to the Carmelite monastery at Auschwitz, is a parody of a female penitent who has walked out on her assimilated American Jewish home. When her family disturbs her during prayers, she behaves exactly as if she was *davening*, as if there was no difference between repentance and apostasy.

Nathan Englander and Jonathan Safran Foer were criticized on the grounds that their depiction of Jews and Judaism was distorted and unbelievable.⁹ Such criticism can only be met by pointing out the fallacy that literature must reflect reality. Englander for one grew up in a religious home but has declared he is “atheist” and “radically secular,”¹⁰ though he coauthored a new English version of the Passover Haggadah with Foer. Englander implies that Jews released their unbearable urges when they intermarried and abandoned religion, as we see in one story in Englander's debut short-story collection *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (1999), when a rabbi (quite incredibly) refers a frustrated married man to a prostitute. His short story “Peep Show” (in *What We Talk About When We Talk about Anne Frank*, 2012), lampoons Orthodox Judaism and blasts the rabbis for hypocritically repressing sex. And yet Englander can also imagine his way into return to Judaism in the *teshuvah* movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In Englander's novel *kaddish.com* (2019), Larry, an atheist porn-addict, refuses to commit to saying *kaddish* (which Englander mistranslates as “the prayer for the dead”) for his father because it makes no sense to him that his father's peace in the next world depended on it. His sister's demand that he promise to say *kaddish*, moreover, threatens his being who he is, although he refuses to agree that he had abandoned his community and family by leaving religion. The *shiva* week for his father is one long torment of imagining he is being humiliated and judged, and he refuses to accept that people are being kind to him and his family. His rage targets his sister and her rabbi as well as a well-meaning community member, who during the *shiva* (week of mourning) for his father tries to persuade him to do his duty as the only son. However, Englander shows Larry's transformation when he realizes his father was right in saying that he was wasting both his time and his life. His repentance begins when he receives a note of acknowledgment from the emissary (*shaliakh mitzvah*) whom he paid to say *kaddish* for his father instead of him. The penitent Larry (who now calls himself Shuli) suddenly realizes that his assimilation as an American Jew leaves his identity an empty signifier, while the surrogate in Jerusalem who was saying *kaddish* instead of him for his father is in the *beit midrash* (study house) and “struggles to assimilate some Talmudic idea.”¹¹ He thinks, “what am I doing in my empty life here? What kind of assimilation is mine?”¹² This is quite a startling questioning of successful assimilation that pits purposeful assimilation of Talmudic knowledge against the empty assimilation of American Jews.

Although Englander glosses over the details of the process of return to religion, Shuli presents his repentance as a coming home to family and God: “What else was Shuli doing but coming home?”¹³ Englander spins an idyllic fairy tale of domestic bliss with a *rebbetzin* who is wiser than Shuli, who deftly pulls holy books off the shelf to give a ruling or pronounce a judgment. Yet the author does not pursue the question whether the return to religion is the answer to the post-assimilation crisis of faith and identity. In the final analysis, Englander’s response to the return to religion is ambivalent. It turns out that *kaddish.com* is a scam and the devout Jew behind it is a scoundrel. Nonetheless, Shuli sets everything to rights at the end of the novel, in effect, reclaiming the birthright he thought he had lost. As well as restoring his pupil Gabriel’s birthright (the wine goblet his mother refused to let him have), Shuli rejoins the community. The novel ends with Shuli standing up for the *kaddish*, ready to take his place in the Jewish community and honor the dead, a curious embodiment of what is jocularly dubbed in America “*kaddish* Judaism” (congregations that exist largely for the saying of the mourners’ prayer). Shuli has in the end claimed his despised birthright and taken personal responsibility for it.

Shuli dreams of a paradise that could accommodate his father’s concept of heaven as an eternal feast for the righteous, the feminist ideal of his sister wearing *tefillin*, and a naked woman who invites him to mutual pleasure with a giant glass dildo. He discovers he has somehow acquired female genitals and can feel the climax of orgasm as a woman. This is perplexing because it was the sight of the woman with the glass dildo on a porn site that triggered his repentance after he realized how empty his life was. The fact that this woman at the end of the day puts on her clothes and goes home, totally indifferent to the men who ogle her genitals, made him think at the time of Courbet’s *Origin of the World*. It is as if we are to have it both ways—the hedonistic pleasure of postmodern worldliness and the *tikkun* in the holy city of Jerusalem that concludes the novel. Shuli mentions in his pep talk to Gabriel the connection in biblical Hebrew of the word for prostitute (*kedasha*) and *kadosh* (holy), and the novel points to the conclusion that there is no division between the profane and the sacred, the religious and the erotic.

Some secular writers regard Judaism as superseded by postmodern spirituality, the trek to the ashram, or the ecstasy of drugs and sex. Sex is sacred in the New Age: in Eshkol Nevo’s *Hamikveh haakharon besibir* (*The Last Mikveh in Siberia*, 2013), sexual energies are released in a ritual bath, resulting in the healing power of adulterous sex. We see this also in a short story by the Israeli Canadian *mizrakhi* author Ayelet Tsabari significantly entitled “Tikkun” (in her collection *The Best Place on Earth*, 2013; translated into Hebrew as *Hamakom hakhi tov ba’olam*, 2016), in which Lior’s newly religious ex-girlfriend Natalie, now kerchiefed and married but childless, gets him to impregnate her in the aftermath of the terrorist bombing of Café Rimon in Jerusalem in a scene of mystical communion with the earth. Jewish American author Joan Leegant in her short-story collection *An Hour in*

Paradise (2003) likewise makes short shrift of zealous seekers of religious truth and transforms Judaism's "arcane" practices into something exotic, exuding the fragrant scent of an edenic living of life to the full without rules or regimentation, without God. Post-secularism, as Jürgen Habermas has commented, understands different faith traditions to coexist without a monopoly on truth within a liberal democratic polity in which all religious and ethnic differences can be somehow integrated, so that the reemergence of spirituality in New Age religions and the return of Christian and Muslim fundamentalism go hand in hand with legalizing same-sex marriage, abortion, and voluntary euthanasia.¹⁴

Off the Track

A generation of Jewish feminists applauded women who turned their backs both on unsatisfactory husbands and on Judaism and pursued sexual desire. Breaking out of the constricting religious world, with its strict rules that regulated women's bodies, was an empowering experience, for what was formerly private and forbidden could now be spoken openly in public.¹⁵ Pearl Abraham's novel *The Romance Reader* (1995), a fictionalized autobiography of growing up in a Satmar Hasidic community in Williamsburg in the 1970s, tells how Rachel Benjamin first rebels by breaking the dress code when she gets a job as a lifeguard at a women's swimming pool. Her father lectures her on how the Jewish people preserved their identity in Egypt because (according to a popular midrash) they did not change three things—their names, their language, and their clothes. Rachel imagines marriage as an escape from her father's strict control and reluctantly shaves her head, like her mother. But the husband chosen for her turns out to be a *tembel* (fool) both in bed and out of it and connives with her father to control her. She manages to lose him on a segregated bus and books into a hotel, getting stared at because she is unaccompanied. *The Romance Reader* became a textbook for Jewish women rebelling against their traditionally minded fathers; for example, Deborah Feldman used it as inspiration for her memoir of leaving her *haredi* home, *Unorthodox* (2012) and its sequel *Exodus* (2014). Against the background of an atheist onslaught on religion and revelations about dangerous and extreme cults in Israel and America, a whole new subgenre of "off-the-*derekh*" memoirs emerged (among them Shalom Auslander's *Foreskin's Lament*, 2007, and Shulem Deen's *All Who Go Do Not Return*, 2015). Such memoirs were read as further evidence of the abusive power of religion, but we should not overlook the more complex picture of the in-between status of exiters from *haredi* and Hasidic communities, some of whom are lost in the modern secular world and some of whom find their way back to Jewish traditions and customs.¹⁶

Of course, there is a difference in motivation and form between novels and memoirs, but sometimes the differences are mostly formal. In Reva Mann's memoir *The Rabbi's Daughter: A True Story of Sex, Drugs and Orthodoxy*

(2007), the daughter of a prominent London rabbi and the granddaughter of the second Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel relates her journey from a difficult childhood with a manic-depressive mother and a handicapped sister into the drug scene, before trying to get high on religion at a Jerusalem seminary. After an arranged marriage left her with three children and a thirst for sexual adventure, she reversed (as she puts it) the notion of *tikkun* (cosmic repair) by going on a self-destructive spree of sex and drugs. Mann describes in graphic detail her passage from the holy to the profane, from meticulous performance of the *mitsvot* (religious commandments) to sexual freedom in a racy plot that is more erotic novel than confession.¹⁷ Disappointed to find neither the spiritual elevation she expected in the *haredi* world nor sexual satisfaction, she searches for spirituality in the sacred waters of the Ganges instead of those of the *mikveh*, before returning to Judaism. If for Mann climaxing was the height of religious ecstasy, Anouk Markovits describes in her novel *I am Forbidden* (2012) her fictional *alter ego*'s truly revolutionary discovery during the 1968 Student Revolt in Paris of illicit sex, which she instigates with a student who turns out, at the climactic moment, to be Jewish. This act of liberation leaves her forbidden to her husband and raises the familiar controversies over the way Judaism forbids all freedoms to women. Markovits, who was brought up in a Satmar family in France, fled Hasidism when she came to the United States to be married to someone she had never met, also takes the lid off the historical truth about the escape from the Holocaust of the Satmar rebbe Joel Teitelbaum on the Kasztner train. Writing a novel is itself an act of liberation which makes Markovits herself forbidden.

Markovits is interested in the act of rebellion itself, not in what happened afterwards, but Leah Vincent's autobiography, *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* (2014), does tell us what happened after her rebellion to make her the woman she is now. Again, challenging the restrictions on clothing are a first step in rebellion against parental control, when Leah is studying at a women's seminary in England and first has contact with boys. Her parents thought their daughter would be under control in Israel, but the beach is a bus ride away and, though the money in Leah's hand feels strange on the Sabbath, she discovers a world of freedom there. Back in America, her parents tell her to go live on her own, and she relates a stay in a mental hospital for compulsive self-harm, where, tied to the bed, she vividly remembers a male orderly watching her urinate in a bedpan. The hospital surveillance and control replicate the repression of her family home, so she runs away. Vincent gives an impression of unloving, uncaring parents who failed to realize that she would take seriously their warning that if she carried on breaking the rules, she would end up becoming a prostitute. So, while working as an office clerk, this is exactly what she decides to do, placing an ad in *Craig's List*, then waiting naked in bed for her first client to come and deflower her. The experience is gruesome, more like being sawed than having sex. In the end, she befriends a black guy living in a basement on her street and finds solace in other marginal outcasts. When she

marries a Gentile, she tells us it is just a matter of changing the name labels on her suitcase, from Goldstein to Vincent, though it is difficult to believe that discarding Jewish identity can be so simple and offhand. In reality, Vincent did not abandon her Jewish identity and became active in *Footsteps*, a network founded by Malkie Schwartz of similar men and women who left religious homes, which helps them adjust to secular life. In an essay, Vincent later acknowledged that secular life was a “wasteland of freedom” and that after failed marriages and picking up men on the subway she could not satisfy her passion:

When I was a Yeshivish girl, every day of my life was a love story. I was devoted to four great romances: with my father, with my father’s God, with the messiah, and with my husband-to-be. There was a fifth great love in Yeshivish life: the love between men, *chavrusas*, who spent long days sitting in pairs, studying Talmudic texts. But this passion was forbidden to me. Girls were not allowed to learn Talmud.¹⁸

Although she enjoys public attention at her lectures, inside she is screaming that she is naked and bleeding:

This is my story, I wanted to say. This. I have lost the great loves of my life: my father, my God, my religious husband, my messiah. My heart has been torn from my chest. A coronary amputation never heals. You just learn to live with the pain.¹⁹

The writing of these novels and memoirs serves as therapy of the traumatic experience these women recall, and they are sometimes the result of creative writing courses at college that marked their breakthrough into higher education and a career, into the secular world where sex is not regulated and sexual orientation is not predetermined. Leah Lax’s memoir *Uncovered* (2015) charts a woman’s journey from an assimilated secular American Jewish home to Hasidism, then drifting into skepticism and loss of faith to the discovery of her same-sex desire. She leaves her husband and family to live with another woman and phones home to tell her Mum that she is now a lesbian. After trying out different religious experiences, she has made it, but it is unclear where she has arrived.

Romance is forbidden reading in strictly religious circles, but it is a staple of Western culture, and it satisfies curiosity for those seeking a way out of restricted and dissatisfied lives, in some cases escaping sexual repression and abuse. While these gripping stories of family and marital dysfunction are truly distressing, they could happen in other families and communities. Of course, there are strict rules, and the encounter with secular ideas of sexuality and romantic love outside arranged marriage may lead to conflicts with the family and breaking its traditions.²⁰ “Off-the-*derekh*” memoirs and novels expose the most intimate experiences, usually considered taboo in the

religious world. Unfortunately, their narratives are marketed in a way that highlights the graphic descriptions of sex and titillates readers expecting to learn the secrets of secluded, secret cults.²¹ The loose adaptation of Deborah Feldman's *Unorthodox* in the Netflix miniseries (2020), for example, detracts from its powerful personal story of a *haredi* woman who walks out on her marriage to freedom in Berlin, where she can sing in public to a mixed audience, because it reduces conflicts to simplistic binaries and stereotypes or invites voyeuristic interest in full nudity, including the inevitable naked woman in a *mikveh*. Like other popular representations of the *haredi* world, it trades in clichés about oppression of women.²² Significantly, in stories of leaving closed, rigid male-dominated communities, such as ex-Mormon Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018), sympathy goes to abused women who have won independence and a college education, but the reader is left with the impression that these oppressive cults are out of place in a modern society without gaining any real understanding of the community's values and way of life.

The predominance of women authors in the “off-the-*derekh*” genre can be explained by the feminist movement's call for female empowerment and an embodied femininity as well as the anti-fundamentalism after 9/11. Indeed, feminists have often taken up the complaints of a number of women who left the Hasidic or *yeshivish* community about their sexual repression or abuse which seemed to bear out the denial of their sexuality outside of reproduction and the denial of their freedom to behave or dress as they wish. Resistance to the role of Jewish women as homemakers engaged in procreation is voiced by a number of Jewish feminists in line with the ideology that dictates that *all* religions impose a patriarchy which renders women inferior. Religious Jewish women are not usually invited to voice their own views on their bodies, their modesty, and their religious beliefs. Too often, feminists invoke Christian stereotypes of the dichotomy of woman as Madonna/whore, falsely implying that Judaism subscribes to Calvinist ideas of the woman's sinfulness, which derives from her sexuality.²³ On the contrary, one reason given for the exemption of women from time-bound commandments in Judaism is not their innate inferiority, but the natural cycle of the biological clock of the woman's body, which is considered complete without circumcision and the time-bound commandments that are mandatory for men. In fact, historically, the traditional role of the “Woman of Valor” as educator and home-keeper has not prevented Jewish women travelling and doing business, including daily contact with men and non-Jews.²⁴ Indeed, the Woman of Valor in the Book of Proverbs is praised also for strength of character and business sense in trading with distant places.

Turning and Returning Again

The *teshuvah* (return to religion) movement picked up momentum with the hippy counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, when disaffected young Jews

sought satisfactory answers to fundamental questions of existence and faith but did not find them in eastern mysticism or self-awareness therapy. Former Marxists, atheists, and anarchists turned to Breslav and other Hasidic sects, not only in search of the spirituality missing in postmodernity but because they found meaning in traditional ways of life, as well as a home (real and figurative) and a stable family.²⁵ As one *ba'alat teshuvah* (female penitent) put it in Debra Renee Kaufman's feminist study of newly Orthodox women who became religious in the 1970s and 1980s, *Rachel's Daughters*, "There I was, twenty-five years of age. I had had my fill of casual sexual relationships, drugs, communal living. [...] I wanted something true and lasting."²⁶ Another newly Orthodox woman thought sexual liberation seemed more like exploitation, and she felt she was a mere sex-object in a male-dominated culture, whereas the family purity laws restored her control over her body, no longer freely available at all times, and restored passion to sex.²⁷ Kaufman notes that gender inequality in pay and work conditions persisted in late twentieth-century America and one in four women could expect to be sexually assaulted by her mid-20s.²⁸ By contrast, Jewish family life seemed to Kaufman's interviewees welcoming in its communal orientation, humility, and self-restraint, so different from Western individualism and self-indulgence.²⁹

If these women are not satisfied with the freedoms of postmodern permissiveness and hedonistic promiscuity, we can ask what attracts them to Judaism. As we will see again in the Coda, Torah Judaism emphasizes the importance of intimacy in marriage and of mutual harmony, including the need for sexual pleasure, yet it insists on purposeful procreation. A Modern Orthodox Jewish position would respond that the dominant discourse, which says do what you feel like, weakens faith and offers behavioral models that are inappropriate for a traditional Jewish lifestyle. In traditional Jewish homes, however, the rules of *tsniut* (modesty) not only regulate clothing, but make talking about sexuality taboo.³⁰ Some disaffected Jewish women are pulled by the secular world where they do not have to worry about religious and social restrictions, yet abandonment of the Jewish community can lead to assimilation into the materialist values of a superficial consumer culture and fake happiness that lacks true spirituality. "Freedom" may be tempting but can trap women into being evaluated for their sexual performance in a power game dominated by men without necessarily attaining lasting relationships or love. One American *ba'alat teshuvah* related how much she found in the Orthodox Jewish world the recognition of her femininity, in contrast to the social pressure to act like men or to please men in order to get anywhere. As an advocate for equal rights, she appreciated the

focus on the beauty and spiritual quality of our everyday lives in the family and as women. I love the feeling that I am simultaneously physical and spiritual. It all fits so well [...] I am part of a community that practices what it believes.³¹

Commenting on Kaufman's explanation of the appeal of Orthodoxy to Jewish women, who see in traditional Judaism recognition of gender difference, Naomi Seidman concludes that these newly Orthodox women use their marginal position to explore possibilities for expressing their femininity within their community.³² Lynn Davidman, however, found in her research that unlike women attracted to Modern Orthodoxy who were well acculturated and integrated into society, women who turned to Lubavitch-Chabad Hasidism were drawn to the impermeable boundaries that it offered, a defense from the alienation and anomie of postmodern life. In any case, both groups sought similar ideals of personal happiness and intimacy.³³

Generalizations and stereotypes in popular culture blind us to significant nuances in differences among Jewish women and to their points of view, which are not usually heard. Many Modern Orthodox Jewish women choose modest clothing and head-covering as a virtue and not a dress code. For them, modesty recovers their femininity and protects them from a rapacious, hedonistic culture dominated by male power structures, not to mention the male gaze.³⁴ The ritual purity laws are frequently taken as a case of sexual repression, but they are meant to safeguard family life and ensure the harmony of marital relations, in contrast to the status of a woman as an available sex-object. It has nothing to do with cleanliness, but with a woman's intimate connection with her body and its life-death cycle.³⁵ Thousands of women feel that their traditional gender roles in the Jewish home empower them, and many *haredi* women are now prominent in the work space and the public sphere, not just the first responders of the movie *93Queen* (USA, 2018) who set up an emergency medical service for women after they realized how demeaning it was for a woman to be intimately inspected by male medical personnel.

In an age when it is acceptable for a *haredi* woman to be an Israeli government minister or a federal judge, countless religious Jewish women pursue careers and lead fulfilling lives. Socioeconomic factors have contributed to the fact that *haredi* women from Bnei Brak and Brooklyn, many with a sound general and Jewish education from Beis Yaakov schools, have entered the public sphere, while some *haredi* women are postponing marriage to gain financial independence. There have been significant changes in the status and ideology of *haredi* women since Jews left the *shtetl*, and religious women (whether or not they think of themselves as religious feminists) participate in women's prayer and Torah study groups or serve as female litigators in the rabbinical courts. "Feminist *rebbetzin*" Rivka Lubitch among others has campaigned for women's rights within the *haredi* community, though it has not been easy to uproot chauvinist preconceptions, and *haredi* women have been engaging more frequently in social activism, whether in local politics, women-only shows, or self-help groups.³⁶ Moreover, with more women entering the workplace and the need for taking care of children and household chores in large families, there is more boundary crossing in the traditional gender roles of men and women in the *haredi* home.³⁷

Religious Jewish women's fiction presents a diversity of backgrounds and directions in stories of return to Judaism. As the novelist Tova Mirvis put it:

In religious literature, lots of stories tell of the way in. In secular literature, lots of stories tell of the way out. But the streets don't have to run only in one direction. They can double back and wind around in complicated, paradoxical patterns.³⁸

As it happens, in her own life Mirvis found the gender separation rules irksome but did not think of separating from her Orthodox way of life until her divorce: "If you left, you were in danger of losing everyone you loved. If you left, you were in danger of losing yourself."³⁹

Far from the familiar conversion narrative in American literature, the turn or return to religion more often than not leads, as Mirvis noted, in different, sometimes unexpected directions. In the examples I will select from the novels of Allegra Goodman, Tova Mirvis, and Dara Horn in America and Noa Yaron-Dayan, Michal Govrin, and Emunah Elon in Israel, I will follow the journey from the secular world to rediscovery of Jewish traditional lifestyles and renewed faith in the covenantal narrative that binds God and the people of Israel. Rarely is there a moment of sudden revelation; it is usually a slow and painful process. These novels expose the "modern" or "progressive" values of liberal secular society as superficial and shallow, but they also engage in frank discussion of sex and sexuality, contraception and childbearing, head-covering and modest clothing. Some of these novels are stylistically flawed and occasionally didactic, but they are never free of doubts and disappointments that help the readers identify with their protagonists' failures and achievements. At stake is the reconciliation of commitment to Torah with independence, sexuality, women's rights, above all the struggle for love. The generational return in America revisits the values of immigrant Jews who cast off their religious garb and customs to become Americans, a move that is not so much nostalgic as reconstructive. The generational pattern in these novels looks back to the faith of previous generations yet questions basic concepts of a woman's freedom and liberty. It seems in these novels that a woman may have to leave in order to come back.

Helene Meyers recalls growing up in the 1970s in a secular family and being taught contempt for observant Jews. She learnt from "liberal-progressive" feminism that Jewish marital laws enforced misogyny, that Judaism was the source of all patriarchy, and that she had to abhor religion if she valued her freedom. She mistakenly thought Orthodox Jewish feminism was some kind of contradiction.⁴⁰ The truth is that the postfeminist New Age did not always live up to its promise and the daughter of a feminist mother who experimented with sex and drugs found purpose and meaning in the traditional world of her immigrant grandparents, which feminists rejected for excluding women. The trajectory of the rebellious Jewish daughter was turned round—one thinks of the feminist mother's failed attempt to recover her

daughter in Anne Roiphe's *Lovingkindness* (1987) or the prodigal daughter in Allegra Goodman's *Paradise Park* (2001), both stories of rebellious Jewish daughters who rediscover spirituality and return to both Judaism and matrimony.⁴¹ This does not mean that the female penitent has inevitably found happiness. More precisely, "happiness" has been questioned and redefined. Goodman's *Paradise Park*, for example, takes us on a tour of options for getting high on nature, sex, Reform Judaism, and Hasidism, but none of these satisfies Sharon Spiegelman spiritually or intellectually. The expedient plot device of her Russian musician lover's refusal to undergo *halakhic* conversion saves her from the final step of commitment to a traditional Jewish marriage. The novel ends with a compromise—a loving relationship that embraces Jewish values and customs, but without abandoning feminism or liberalism. As in Goodman's debut novel *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998), a genuine spiritual search breaks free of the strict rules of a religious community but also seeks satisfaction beyond the middle-class home. *Paradise Park* ends with Sharon's reconciliation with her hostile and unaccepting parents, but it shows clearly how a generation moved on from American assimilation and was finding its own way to faith and renewed ethnic identity.

The young generation, like Baruch (Bryan) and Tzippy in Tova Mirvis's *The Outside World* (2004), reject college and careers and return to the *ye-shiva* world of black jackets and kerchiefs, to stricter rules than those their parents kept, to the *shiddukh*, and a traditional marriage. Tzippy has to learn the rules of *niddah*, which forbid touching her husband during her monthly period and the following week, but she also discovers *haredi* lingerie stores in Brooklyn where she buys the sexy underwear to wear under her modest dress. Baruch and his new bewigged wife head out to Memphis to do *kiruv* (bringing Torah to an assimilated Jewish community), although in the end Tzippy and her mother each find more freedom and independence, while Baruch strengthens his religious observance. Mirvis (who grew up in a Modern Orthodox synagogue in Memphis) is here an insider critiquing a world that is all too familiar to her.⁴² As Mirvis tells us in her memoir *The Book of Separation* (2017), religious women cover their hair not just out of modesty but to say who they are, to belong to a community of belief, separate from the outside world. As a married religious woman, Mirvis tells us in her memoir, she felt she had to wear a wig, not because she believed in wearing it, but because she had to show she was the kind of woman who wore a wig.⁴³ She herself left that constricting community to choose who she wanted to be, to overcome her fear of always being watched and judged, and to explore the endless possibilities life offered, whether exotic restaurants, adultery, or rock climbing (in that order), proving to herself she could do what she wanted to do. In separating herself from her marriage and her family, from laws and values that held her world together and told her who she was, Mirvis escapes in a premeditated desecration of the holy New Year to a Kripalu yoga retreat, substituting one false devotion for another and coming unmoored from everything that was holding her together. Her

separation cuts her off from her people (the literal meaning of the divine punishment of *karet*), yet she tries to remain true to herself.

The generational shift toward religiosity comes out strongly in Dara Horn's novel *In the Image*. One of the contemporary Jewish American writers dubbed "New Yiddishists," Horn would have us imagine what it is like to see Jewish history through a tourist's eyes, as when Bill Landsmann shows Leora his slide collection of the locations of Jewish catastrophe, as if Job had a camera. This modern Job challenges God in his anguish over the loss in the Holocaust of his family, of an entire culture, but the Creator answers back (as in the Book of Job) that he could not match the Divine image in which man was created.⁴⁴

In constructing a tourist's view across two generations, Horn imagines what it is like to look at religious Jewish women through the eyes of an assimilated Jew who is secular and distant from Jewish history. Jason looks in shocked disbelief at the kerchiefed Hasidic mothers herding their kids through the local zoo in a small New Jersey town on a *khol hamo'ed* treat (during the intermediary days of Passover or Sukkot). They are an affront to him, as if saying that he is not a sufficiently good Jew, and they threaten to bring the "ghetto" of Brooklyn into his backyard. His girlfriend Leora does not share his hatred of other Jews but sees in this scene family love and happiness as well as a history going back to seventeenth-century Poland.⁴⁵ Yet, it is Jason whom Mr. Rosenthal, a resident of the old age home, charges with the retrieval of the *tefillin* discarded by the new immigrants arriving on Ellis Island at the turn of the twentieth century. Jason meanwhile becomes religious under the influence of a college football coach and marries a Hasidic woman who cannot have children. It is only on her own journey that Leora discovers the meaning of the discarded *tefillin* which, as legend has it, immigrants threw in the harbor on arrival in a symbolic gesture of discarding their Judaism in order to become Americans. Leora, a third-generation American, feels the need to recover the lost *tefillin* in order to reclaim her Judaism.⁴⁶ When Leora discovers a pair of *tefillin* in a New York curios store, she remembers Mr. Rosenthal's mission to retrieve the discarded underwater *tefillin*. Jake, a young Columbia University lecturer whom Leora met in Amsterdam at a Spinoza conference and with whom she was beginning a relationship that blossoms into mutual love and betrothal, redeems that pair of *tefillin* as a token of love for her. This brings us back to a redemptive narrative, albeit in an updated version of romance and tentative return to Judaism. Significantly, the agent of redemption here is female. In Yiddish modernist Jacob Glatstein's poem "A yidishe kroyn" ("A Jewish Crown," 1956), which Horn features in the reader's guide appended to her novel, the *tefillin* will always be waiting to be reclaimed as a legacy of Jewishness. The title of Horn's novel alludes to a phrase in Glatstein's poem that refers to the parents' shame in seeing their son's head uncovered like a non-Jew but derives from the story told in Genesis of the creation of man in the Divine image, reminding us of the moral duty to be compassionate.

However, *In the Image* is not written as the confession of a penitent, but instead Horn chooses the double vision of the American immigrant narrative, seen from a twenty-first-century perspective that is distant from observance of Jewish traditions and identifies through the recording of genealogies which mark and set up distance from the immigrant generation.⁴⁷ In the parallel story of the immigrant generation, Leah Landsmann reverses the direction of the narrative and throws her father's *tefillin* overboard when she leaves New York to return to the Old Country after an aborted marriage with an abusive man and a clandestine relationship with a man she cannot marry for *halakhic* reasons, because she is a divorced woman and he is a Cohen. After his death, she finds herself pregnant and alone. In her revolt against the laws of the Torah, she calls her son Nadav, after the son of Aaron the High Priest, who brought "strange fire" in the book of Leviticus. Nadav grows up damaged and disturbed, stigmatized as illegitimate, and later commits suicide. Here, a strong female protagonist rebels against women's status behind the partition of the *'ezrat nashim* (women's gallery in the synagogue), but we also see a generational pattern of leaving and returning to faith, as in Horn's *Guide to the Perplexed* (2013) and its prequel *String Theory: The Parents Ashkenazi* (2014), which raise similar issues to Rebecca Goldstein's *The Mind-Body Problem*. However, the interwoven stories in *In the Image* are plagued by disasters and fatalities so that the cycle of catastrophe seems unending, leading to neither successful assimilation nor final redemption beyond an ethical commitment that arises out of a rereading of Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones.

When Jake buys a diamond for Leora's engagement ring, he meets Jason (now Yehuda), who teaches him a moral lesson in accepting life with all its flaws. In the male communion between mentor and potential penitent, Yehuda is juxtaposed with the skeptic Jake, so that the transmission of wisdom and faith seems at first to exclude women. However, the central female protagonist Leora forges a stronger link in the generational chain. In a metaphorical sense, Horn is recuperating the discarded *tefillin* in having Leora, in a closing dream sequence under New York's harbor, understand her place in Jewish history other than through the eyes of a tourist. The magical realist underwater fantasy, Caroline Rody has noted, indulges in Cynthia Ozick's "dream of reversal," calling back the dead to resurrect the lives and loves they discarded and rescue an abandoned potential.⁴⁸ In an inversion of the new immigrants' abandonment of their Judaism, the agent of transmission is a young woman returning to Judaism who recovers a male symbol of religiosity and makes of it something meaningful to her. The imagery of displacement is countered by reconnection to the Old World, discarded together with their *tefillin* by the immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. This postmodern anti-nostalgic reconstruction of the universal secularization of the newcomers nevertheless comes with a post-Holocaust questioning of Divine benevolence and omnipotence that is informed by Spinozian skepticism. As the literary scholar Meyrav Koren-Kuik comments,

the novel's magical realism constructs the American Jewish experience as normative and affirms New York City is home, not Zion, but it also constructs Jewish identities as fluid.⁴⁹ Indeed, Leora's Judaism seems a strange combination of Friday night candle-lighting followed by watching VCR rentals, on the one hand, and, on the other, the sheer wonder of American materialism in Costco.

The generational return of American Jews who find themselves in Israeli *yeshivot* has become not just the subject of academic research but a novel, Beth Kissileff's *Questioning Return* (2016), which studies the phenomenon in the 1990s through the eyes of a young Princeton student, who cannot help measuring the newly religious, contrary to professional and ethical principles, through her sexual desire and her materialistic secular values (she is particularly fixated on the aesthetics of food). The fictional persona Wendy doubts whether any of this return to religion is more than Pavlovian conditioning, but she is apparently too caught up with her own feelings in her sexual relationships to do more than deliver clichés about women's inferiority in Judaism or about doing things only if they are permissible, which does not sound like a lot of fun to her. In fact, Wendy never sorts out the contradictions between religion and sexual freedom, and she never really answers the question she asks her interviewees, "where are you going?" Her sole commitment is to the freedom of uncertainty, not the penitents' certainty of faith. In a play in the novel's title on the term *teshuvah*, which can also mean "answer" in Hebrew, she is drawn in the opposite direction, to questioning, as in *khazarah beshealah* (rejecting religion through questioning it).

Recovering the Kerchief

In the United States, religious fiction reflects competing perspectives within the American Jewish community, but in Israel it participates in a stormy debate over national identity. Religious fiction in both Israel and the diaspora nevertheless confronts common political and ideological crises. Since the 1990s, religious women in Israel have addressed a mainly secular readership and show the complex realities of the religious community from the viewpoint of the woman under the kerchief, whose recovery (or recovering) of Jewish traditions can be seen in the kerchief, which I will use as a loose metaphor for accepting *tsniut* and all that goes with it in the return to Judaism in novels by newly religious women. Their influences have included Israeli women writers such as Amalia Kahana-Carmon and Zeruya Shalev, but their perspective is religious.⁵⁰ Nowadays religious women writers have created a room of their own, just like Israeli women writers who came to prominence in the 1990s after long being marginalized.⁵¹ Yael Feldman shows how the new wave of Israeli women writers questioned the modernist project and found that traditional feminism was complicated by postmodernist negation of the subject position and the deconstruction of a binary self/Other in gender difference.⁵² Yet, unlike them, religious Israeli women

writers face dilemmas of devotion versus desire or family purity laws versus promiscuity, as they negotiate their subjectivity and sexuality in a mixed, predominantly secular society.⁵³

Sexual freedom looks more like a deceptive trap in Noa Yaron-Dayan's immensely popular confessional novel about a secular woman's spiritual journey to religious faith and repentance in *Mekimi (Raise Me Up)*, 2007; Israeli TV series, 2013). The title is based on the verse in Psalm 113:7 that describes God raising the oppressed and the exiled out of abjection, from the depths of despair and disbelief. The nameless authorial persona introduces herself as wearing a kerchief that covers all her hair and declares she has achieved near invisibility as a *haredi* woman of the Breslav sect by wearing plain, modest clothing, which ensures that in public she is free from the male gaze and does not draw attention to herself. This is a story of the discovery of true freedom which distinguishes between freedom (*khofesh*) and liberty (*kherut*).⁵⁴ These are distinct concepts—the freedom *from* oppression and the liberty *to* do what she believes to be right, but this is also the liberty to choose national and personal destiny. She imagines her former self as an alter ego called Alma, a wild young woman with a pretty smile and despairing eyes, who appears to her sometimes in dreams, evoking in her both nostalgia for the past and repulsion for the mess and filth of the life she left behind ten years previously. This is the woman she once wished to kill and dump in some sand dune, just as Virginia Woolf tried to murder the Angel in the House, except that here (in an inversion of that trope) the author is writing as the Woman of Valor who is exorcising the libertarian secular Girl About Town.

Clothing is just one area where social norms are challenged and shown to be the opposite of freedom. As a TV and media celebrity, Alma is judged by her clothes and outer appearance, although the outfits chosen for a photo shoot do not suit her at all. Alma lives in a daily nightmare of gossip and publicity, constantly having to show the public a fake smile. Her only escape is her messy apartment, where she can kick off her shoes and drag on a cigarette before rushing off to another engagement or show. When her boyfriend Guri drops her off each night on his motorbike, she gets the nauseous feeling in her stomach that she will not see him again and will be abandoned to her loneliness. This is the closest she feels to love. The rest of the time, she hates him, a street puppy (*gur*) who behaves like a Rottweiler.⁵⁵ Their master-slave power relations leave her the choice of biting back or claiming her solitude without him. Alma thinks she has found her man in Ben, an elusive drifter who grew up in the sand dunes of Sinai. However, she knows that at any moment he can abandon her, leaving her alone and emptied out. This is a melancholy appraisal of ways in which women can be trapped in the power games of postmodern love.

The throbbing Tel Aviv nightclub scene, where beauty and fame are weapons to win success and money, bring Alma no pleasure or happiness. Everyone knows her, except her, for she does not really know herself.⁵⁶ Her body and her

hair are assets with which to market commodities and to ensnare men. The Brave New World of sex and drugs does not fill the hole within her.⁵⁷

The brief repetitive episodes in Alma's daily routine might tire a reader impatient for plot development. But this is just the point: Alma's life has no development until she discovers her story in her search for something meaningful to wake up for in the morning beyond the fake life she is leading: she thinks to herself, "Something is wrong here, something is missing."⁵⁸ The repetitive return to a realization of vacuity and futility could go on endlessly, until their friend, Brenner (a former dropout and pimp remaking his life), bursts in to Alma and Ben's apartment in the middle of the night and tells them about Breslav Hasidism, shows them the real sky instead of the fake one, shows them infinity.... How, he challenges them, can they look at the infinity of stars in the sky and deny there is a Creator? Alma goes to bed, leaving Ben stunned at the question that has never occurred to him.⁵⁹ Brenner acquaints them with Daniel, a Breslav Hasid, who eventually overcomes their initial derision and suspicion. In this conversion narrative, the revelation of previously unimagined spiritual depths, of a world beyond the futile emptiness of their lives, comes slowly, impeded by obstacles and setbacks. There is no sudden vision or miracle, only recognition of deep truths that these young and restless young people never knew. Whereas Ben is quickly intrigued and becomes hooked onto kabbalah, Alma resists and vents her anger on the Breslav preacher, Daniel. Yaron-Dayan wants us to understand how a secular, fun-loving, educated woman would respond to the idea of becoming religious. Her reaction is to run to buy a particularly expensive and particularly tight-fitting miniskirt in protest at what she perceives to be a threat to her lifestyle and to her relationship with Ben; she cannot stand the very thought of "religion." Yaron-Dayan is showing here how the process of *teshuvah* runs up against preconceptions and prejudgments, especially fear of something unknown that could change the familiar routine of secular life or challenge politically correct opinions.

If Alma is still stuck in a culture of materiality which revolves around clothes and appearances, Daniel, however, declares that he does not need to change his clothes to make a statement. He is, as he puts it, as out of fashion as could be in his *peyot* and Hasidic black suit, an unchanging identification with a religious world far removed from secular Tel Aviv. He is striving despite or rather through his Hassidic uniform for individualism, for the freedom to be oneself, and does not wish to be a conformist slave to fashion. Here, Yaron-Dayan turns upside down a secular perception that religion restricts individual freedom with its dress code and behavioral rules. Alma's rejection of Daniel because of his clothes makes the point that the secular world only looks at dress and not at the person.

Alma seeks an escape from her dead-end life and runs off with Ben in tow to the sleaziest hotel in the sleaziest part of Amsterdam, where she pushes the boundaries in order to experience life to the limits. As Leora discovers when she goes to Amsterdam in Dara Horn's *In the Image*, drugs do not bring

long-term happiness, and when Alma decides they must run away to the farthest place from their present lives, she is forced to confront herself and her Jewish identity in a moment she recognizes as *hashgakhah*, a moment of Divine providence that demonstrates (in the words of Psalm 139:7–12): “Where can I go from Your spirit / Where can I flee from Your presence? / If I ascend to heaven, You are there / and if I make my bed in the lower world, behold, it is You!” God is always there waiting for her, however much she hides.⁶⁰ This is the moment when, fleeing God (we cannot help thinking of Jonah), she meets a Dutch Jew, the owner of a rundown guesthouse in the back of beyond, who has nothing to offer them except two Hanukkah candles in the window and a Bible, which Alma opens to precisely this verse in Psalms.

Alma’s journey to faith is challenged by friends and by her parents as well as Elisha, an acquaintance of her parents who left the *haredi* community and whom they enlist to persuade her that her attraction to religion is irrational and abnormal. To all these, she must give an account of why she is turning her back on “modern” life and becoming a “fanatic.” Yaron-Dayan does not spare the reader the lengthy arguments and debates. The switch from non-belief to belief is nonetheless not easy, as Alma learns from Mika, a close female friend who became religious after a trip to India. Mika tells her that putting on a kerchief does not change who you are inside. All your life, she adds, you must struggle with your former self: “It does not end until the last day of your life,” she says. “I am supposed to do *tshuvah* every day.”⁶¹

Yet Alma does not know if she has the courage not to be afraid of falling, of failing to lead a religious life, but she understands that her soul is in exile, here in the State of Israel, and that although she studied Bible at school, only now does she see its relevance to her life. When Alma tries on a kerchief in front of a mirror before her wedding, Yaron-Dayan offers an archetypal self-examination in search of inner spiritual and religious identity that resembles a similar scene in Ruchama King’s *Seven Blessings* (2004). Alma declares the Torah’s rules are truer and more straightforward for women because they free women from the twisted power games of society’s sex market.⁶² Before marrying Ben, Alma takes the plunge into Orthodoxy through immersion in a *mikveh* (the ritual bath which is mandatory for all Jewish brides in Israel). This is not a mere formality, but an act of conversion from one identity to another through the transitional space of the *mikveh*, which symbolizes acceptance of religious obligations, acceptance of who she really is. Feeling reborn and cleansed of sin through her penitence (*tshuvah*), which is likened in Judaism to ritual purification, Alma leaves her fears of failure in the *mikveh*.⁶³

Redeeming Love, Redeeming the Body

If *Mekimi* is the definitive confession of a female penitent, Michal Govrin’s novel *Hashem* (1995; *The Name*, 1998) turns out not to be the conventional narrative of return one would expect, with a resolution one way or another in acceptance or rejection of faith.⁶⁴ The story of Amalia (also known as Emily or Malinka), a former student at the Neve Rakhel women’s seminary

for *ba'alot teshuvah*, is told in the present tense, with flashbacks to memories of her past life, as a confessional diary set in Jerusalem. The novel opens with Amalia weaving prayer shawls and a curtain for the Holy Ark. The days are the counting of the Omer, when Jews count the days from Passover to Shavuot, from the Exodus to the Giving of the Torah at Sinai. In Lurianic kabbalah, these days correlate with the mystical Sefirot in a *tikkun*, or repair of the world, a correlation which Amalia follows in her counting of the days to the completion of her *tikkun* as well as in her weaving and the writing of her confession as a way of striving for a personal redemption.

There is something obsessively compulsive in Amalia's devotion to finish her weaving by Shavuot, which completes the Days of the Omer with the celebration of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, a divine revelation that brings together (in Jewish mystical teaching in the Zohar) bride and groom, Israel and the *Shekhinah*. She too burns to unite herself body and soul to God, known in Judaism as *Hashem*, the ineffable Name, which is the title of the novel. In so doing, Amalia will reenact the fate of her father's lover, Amalia Auerbach, whose name she bears, making her (in Dina Wardi's phrase) a "memorial candle."⁶⁵ Amalia (Malinka) Auerbach committed suicide on the Appelplatz, the concentration camp parade ground, an act of defiance against the Nazis and an act of martyrdom (*kiddush hashem*). At the same time, Amalia is driven by her will to expiate her sin of illicit sex as well as her affair with Hubert, her German lover. That was an affair which was supposed to atone for Holocaust suffering and help bring Malinka Auerbach to life through her music and the photos they took for the album dedicated to her.⁶⁶

Amalia's own penitence should have brought her to start a new life with a new name, but she cannot separate from the name she has been given of the Holocaust victim who haunts her (another meaning of the novel's title) and cannot separate from the past to achieve individuation and wholeness. The words of Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah* ("Laws of Penitence," 2:4) reverberate in Amalia's mind, calling on the sinner to repent, to change his or her name and become Other, not the same person who sinned. Yet Amalia distorts her rabbi's admonition to purge her body of impurity and instead offers herself as a sacrifice for her shameful guilt. A mystical rabbi Avuyah Aseraf, who is publicly denounced as a heretic, persuades her that her repentance could redeem both souls, hers and Malinka Auerbach's. This leads Amalia to dangerous thoughts. Amalia's prayer for God to accept her in the union of bride and groom is an erotic act that goes beyond this traditional trope for the revelation at Sinai. The novel opens accordingly with Amalia's prayer and confession:

May you accept me with love and desire. May my little bit of fat and blood diminished today be as fat placed on the altar before You. And may You want me.

If only it could end here. If only my sacrifice were complete, and my expiation full before I finish the task.⁶⁷

Amelia reinterprets this prayer, based on a meditation before an ascetic's fast (BT Brakhot 17a), as a bodily self-sacrifice for the love of God. Paradoxically, if Amalia succeeds in her ultimate sacrifice (as we are led to believe she will), she will have succeeded in her self-destructive mission to unite with God and will have failed to achieve what penitence is really about—as her seminary teacher Rabbi Gotthilf repeatedly explains to her, the responsibility of the remnant that lives after Auschwitz is to repair the world by rebuilding it, by marrying a suitable partner and having children.⁶⁸

However, wracked by confusion, madness, and doubts, Amalia fails to find repentance in love or to see human love as an instrument of salvation, and she calls off her engagement with the penitent Isaiah, unsure whether having a baby with him would be a *kiddush hashem*.⁶⁹ She is afraid that God rejects her and there is no possibility of atonement.⁷⁰ Amalia turns inward in her despair and, in what Rachel F. Brenner has compared to Walter Benjamin's concept of the weak messianic power in every generation,⁷¹ she seeks salvation in destruction itself. Some *midrashic* sources relate that the messiah will be born on the ninth of Av (JT Berakhot 2) and that the death of the righteous atones for the sins of Israel (see Vayikra Rabbah 20:12; BT Berakhot 62b). In making destruction the fulcrum of meaning in a post-Holocaust life, Govrin draws on a mystical interpretation of Moses' breaking of the Tablets of the Law when the people sinned with the golden calf. The broken tablets in this interpretation represent fragmentation alongside wholeness, yet Amalia sees in it a secret key to knowledge of the traumatic past, leading her to join the dead in her own self-destruction (she has a history of attempted suicide). On the one hand, Amalia looks to Rabbi Gotthilf as a father figure and a savior (as his name suggests), who seeks to set her on the path of the righteous and ensure that she marries a suitable devout partner, who is also *ba'al teshuvah* and understands her inner struggles. On the other hand, she is drawn to mystical, heretical depths in which she cannot fully control her destiny, the destiny of her name.

The novel is inspired by a number of Jewish thinkers, including the Aish Kodesh (Rabbi Kalonymus of Piaseczno), the legendary preacher of the Warsaw Ghetto, historians of Jewish mysticism Moshe Idel and Haviva Pedaya, and philosopher Jacques Derrida. Govrin's novel, like much of her work in literature and the theater, explores ways in which Judaism can be embodied in the lives of women. In *The Name* the writing is embodied through a woman's sensuality as the delirious and tormented Amalia treads the rocky paths of Jerusalem that breathes with the feelings and scents of a lush, mystical landscape, its burning heat and dramatic sundown, the supple breeze, the eucalyptus trees scattering tiny seeds.... The devotion of mind and body, flesh and spirit, is how, according to the Legend of the Ten Martyrs, Rabbi Akiva interpreted the first verse of the *Shm'a*, the Jewish credo, when he gave his life in martyrdom. Govrin relates this interpretation of the well-known version in BT Brakhot 61b in explaining, in her contribution to a symposium at New York's New School in 2001, *Body of Prayer*

(coauthored with Derrida and poet David Shapiro), how her novel was written as a prayer, a religious act of devotion to God, woven, like Amalia's tapestry and votive prayers, into a book. This embodied prayer, Govrin tells us, is transgressive because it comes from the body of a woman. However, if the idea of expiation through self-sacrifice sounds heretical, it can never be, Govrin claims, blasphemous because a woman's prayer is an embodiment of her femininity.⁷² If this resembles New Age urgings for body-soul wholeness, it also verges on the heresy of the Christian doctrine of sacramental union with the body of Jesus, whose name Amalia hears being called upon when she is out walking.

Govrin describes her upbringing as non-observant, but she felt a bodily urge to pray when she was studying in Paris for her doctoral dissertation on the sacred in theater and in Hasidism. This experience led her to keep kashrut and Shabbat; it also led her to visit Poland and reenact her mother's journey to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. The rereading of Jewish mysticism and the reembodyment of Judaism in prayer offer Govrin a message of hope and continuity after the traumatic destruction of the Jewish people in the Holocaust. Govrin says her novel is structured as a "prayer which emerges from the point of destruction, from the point of the wound"—the Holocaust.⁷³ Such embodied prayer seeks to reunite the exiled *Shekhinah*, a feminine divine presence, the guiding and protecting power of wisdom and compassion, with the divine groom in order to bring the final redemption. As Nitza Keren has observed, instead of the phallic trope of the pen, Govrin chooses the loom in order to express female spirituality in Amalia's weaving.⁷⁴ Amalia's weaving of cloth for holy use is meant to be a *tikkun*, a repair of the destruction that afflicted her family and her people. That cosmic repair daunts Amalia, who fears it is too much for one woman and doubts if her faith can stand the trials God has sent her. In the end, the Shavuot festival completes both the counting of the Omer and the weaving as well as the text of Govrin's novel. Amalia, after purifying herself, accepts the Sabbath, with its taste of the world to come and eternal rest.

Arousing Redemption

Yaron-Dayan shows that it is not an easy task to reconcile the desires in a woman's body with her spiritual search. The task is all the more difficult when sexual desire confronts redemption of the nation. In Emunah Elon's novel *Simkhah gedolah bashamayim* (2004; *If You Awaken Love*, 2004) the journey from a secular life in Tel Aviv to the world of faith and commitment to Religious Zionist values is one of spiritual return but also emotional crisis that, as I will show, brings into conflict narratives of feminine self-liberation and narratives of redemption and raises issues of national as well as personal identities. At age 40, divorced and with a daughter old enough to go her own way, Shlomzion Dror measures the distance she has travelled from the time she broke off her relationship with the rabbinical student Yair

Berman and measures her growth and contentment since then. In the days between the Oslo Accords and the assassination of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzkhak Rabin, Shlomzion's story also measures the historical distance from the Yom Kippur War and the frustrated hopes of the peace process to the reawakening of national consciousness and return to the Land of Israel west of the Jordan, to rebuilding the land promised to Abraham. The novelist imagines how the secular public sees the settler movement and enacts a response to their misconceptions as well as engaging with a moral self-reckoning by the settlers. On the eve of the 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, Religious Zionist writers looked to Elon for a voice to answer back that did not cringe from self-exposure.⁷⁵

Emunah Elon's debut novel is a sort of fictional autobiography of a woman struggling for perfection, who lost both love and hope but found contentment in daily survival as a secular single mother before becoming plunged once more, 20 years later, into the questions that seared her soul. It is also the story of a nation seeking spiritual redemption after the military victory of the Six Day War and the traumatizing shock of the Yom Kippur War. This was an idealistic generation that discovered the gateway of the final redemption was difficult and narrow. Elon wishes to show that the faith with which young men and women built with their own hands outposts which secured the hard-won Land of Israel for the Jewish people was not to be taken for granted.

Here, the generational turn is that of Shlomzion's daughter Maya, who rebels against her mother's secular abandonment of her religious upbringing. Unexpectedly, Maya's path to religion brings Shlomzion to a crisis point when she discovers that Maya's fiancé is the son of her former lover, Rabbi Yair Berman. Shlomzion had been dreaming her daughter would grow up into a fun-loving secular woman, free of complexes and conflicts. Now she is faced with the almost immediate prospect of a daughter in a kerchief living the religious life she herself rejected.

Shlomzion's family history is checkered with abandonment and grief, with arranged matches and unloving couples, like something (as Shlomzion tells her grandmother) out of Agnon's story "Tehillah," about an old woman who at the end of her life is still seeking forgiveness for the broken betrothal with her childhood lover, for which she feels she was punished by the loss of her children and her husband.⁷⁶ Similar misfortunes in love brought Shlomzion's family from Poland to Jerusalem, where Shlomzion grew up as an unloved child of parents who did not love each other but did not separate, despite her flamboyant father's flagrant infidelity. She shares her idealistic vision of love with her childhood friend Yair, but she too learns the disillusion of grief and abandonment in the repetition of the transgenerational pattern of broken betrothal and rejection in love, when she loses the chance of marrying her childhood love Yair. The pattern of betrothal and betrayal acquires symbolic meaning for both the individual and the nation, as we will see. The inability to break the pattern points to the larger quandary of

women brought up in the values of Torah Judaism and Religious Zionism, who wish to determine their own destiny within faith but who cannot resist the pull of desire and are drawn to the secular outside world.

While she lives abroad with her family in New York, enjoying the freedom of the late 1960s, free love, the student revolt, and civil liberties campaign, Yair matures and discovers in the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook the meaning to his existence as part of the Jewish people. Elon's novel serves as a stage for the debate on whether, as Shlomzion thinks, the greatest freedom is to be a citizen of the world, a liberated individual, or whether being born a Jew acquires meaning only when connected to the nation's roots in its ancestral land, the spiritual source of its collective identity, and the well-spring of universal redemption. From Rabbi Kook's *Orot teshuvah* (*Lights of Penitence*), Shlomzion learns that:

every individual was in fact a part of the whole, that even I was not just floating in space but connected with all of existence, that the universe was good and just, and that the goodness and justice inside of us comes as a result of our own correspondence with this All.⁷⁷

Shlomzion works hard under Yair's loving tutelage on the elevation of her soul by studying the Maharal's *Netsakh yisrael* (*Eternal Israel*) and Moshe Luzzatto's *Mesilat yesharim* (*Path of the Just*) and turns for advice to female spiritual leaders (*rabaniyot*). Rabbi Kook taught that the soul naturally yearns for perfection in unification with God. Yet, Shlomzion finds that the more she yearns to be closer to God, the more disdain she feels for this world, for everyday material achievements. This, as the fictional *rabanit* Hava Schor points out to her, is exactly what Rabbi Zvi Yehuda (Rabbi Kook's son and successor at Merkaz Harav yeshiva) meant in his influential book on the redemption of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, *Lenetivot yisrael* (*Pathways of Israel*, 1967) when he described the agonizing struggle of the confined soul to reach out for perfection and rise above the mortal imperfections of this world. One must learn, he taught, to live with imperfection while striving for a pure soul and sanctifying this world.⁷⁸ These are the principles according to which Yair and Shlomzion plan their utopia, a village of prophets designed to be in natural harmony with the Land of Israel.

Shlomzion feels like the bride in Song of Songs, waiting for her lover to knock, just as (in Rabbi Kook's interpretation) the people of Israel await the knocking of the redemption. But her faith is shaken by the devastating shock of the Yom Kippur War and by unanswered doubts, including feminist questions about the role of women and submission to the decisions and advice of the *rosh yeshiva* (head of the yeshiva), whom even government ministers consult. The final blow that breaks her faith is the refusal of the *rosh yeshiva* (presumably Rabbi Zvi Yehuda himself) to bless the match of one of his most promising students with this daughter of a heretical university professor. Shlomzion cannot see what Yair can see, that their relationship

is one of dependence, that their love is the love of brother and sister, not of man and wife, and that they are not intended for each other.

Shlomzion interprets Yair's painful rejection of her as God's way of banishing her to exile. Her decision to start a new life opens up new ideas and possibilities. In a tent village in Sinai, she feels liberated and able to say, like Moses before her on the nearby Jabl-Musa (Mount Moses, reputed to be the original Mount Sinai), "here am I, here am I" (*hineni, hineni*).⁷⁹ Shlomzion suddenly realizes that the lovers in Song of Songs did not allow themselves to find each other, that Israel's yearning for God met no answer. It is for this reason that she decides to lose her virginity: she ritually dips in the sea and then seduces Motti "Rosy" Rosenberg (who happens to be Yair's army commander). Elon presents this scene as Shlomzion abandoning her religious principles together with her modest clothing and embracing Eros, here embodied by "Rosy," whom she watches emerging from the water like Neptune. Shlomzion declares (echoing an idea in Jewish mysticism) that a woman was made for desire ever since she was separated from Adam's rib and sought to reunite with her primal partner.

The idyll of sun and sand does not last long. Unable to free herself from her infatuation with Yair, Shlomzion cannot accept that he is married to another woman (her close friend Leah) and has a child by her. This is the biblical story of Rachel and Leah, in a new version retold by Rachel the night she discovered she did not wed Jacob. Shlomzion mourns her desire for what she cannot have and as soon as her baby Maya is born, she divorces the man who loves her and who reformed his life for her. She does not want to be the "mechanical doll" of Dahlia Ravikovich's famous poem; she wants to be free of all father-gods and God the father. Shlomzion soon finds herself among other Israelis who cast themselves free from home and family, including some who left the *haredi* world, and ran away to India or New York. Back in Israel, she chooses her lonely desolation in a closed room of her own, like the homes she designs, which allow privacy instead of the shared living space in the Israeli communal ethos of the 1950s and the 1960s in ideology and architecture. This refiguration of place as an alternate, individualistic space (to which we will return more than once) marks a generational shift in conceptualizing collective and national identities. Shlomzion's rejection of belief in the eternal bond of the people of Israel with the Land of Israel pushes her into the Peace Now camp, despite the failure of the Oslo Accords and the assassination of Rabin. The assassination of Israel's Prime Minister was a great shock, especially because the murderer was a model law student at Bar-Ilan, the Religious Zionist flagship university, who claimed rabbinical sanction (though he had none). Shlomzion vents her feelings of rejection on the religious settlers, who were blamed at the time for violence and bloodshed. Because the story is told through Shlomzion's perspective, we come to understand her anger as a portrait of Israelis on the left who believed that sacrificing territory would bring peace, arguing that land had no intrinsic value if it cost lives to keep. Yet Shlomzion's pain is too personal

and self-centered to allow her to connect with the collective or with her own family, to reach out beyond her cozy nest of mother and daughter. She goes from one casual relationship to another (including an adulterous affair) and enjoys an independent career as a successful interior designer, until one day she gives this up as well. Independence and freedom in themselves, Elon is saying, do not satisfy a woman's wish for fulfillment of the burning desire within her.

Written under the tutelage of Amos Oz, Elon's portrait of Shlomzion's free spirit is sensitive, without being judgmental. Shlomzion is not alone in failing to marry the man she loved. Yet, in the end she realizes that her love awakened too early for desire to be fulfilled, and this may, she thinks, also be true of love of the Land, which might have come too soon for it to be fulfilled. Yair tells her that their love will be fulfilled, and by analogy the Land will be redeemed, in the next generation, through her daughter Maya and his son Ariel, who will realize their ideals on a pastoral hilltop, just as Shlomzion and Yair had dreamed of a utopian city of righteous prophets.

This hope for the future is born out of the bitter arguments in the settler movement itself. In real life, dissensions over which path to take were reflected in the split between such visionaries as Rabbi Hanan Porat, who did not stray from the ideals of Gush Emunim at Sebastia, and the more pragmatic leaders, such as Rabbi Benny Elon (the author's husband), who went into politics and tried to change the situation from within the institutions of Israeli democracy (both Porat and Benny Elon died tragically of cancer at the height of their careers). *Rabanit* Elon, it should be noted, is one of the charismatic women teachers and spiritual leaders who have emerged in the religious community. Orit Avishai reads her novel dismissively as a "cautionary tale about an unreasonable love fueled by passion [which] reins in these potentially threatening transgressions," like the counseling seminars written for religious young people contemplating marriage, advising them to look for companionship and compatibility, not passion, when they choose their partner.⁸⁰ Yet my reading suggests that this is a reductive interpretation and that the novel actually focuses on the secular "modern" world and its confrontation with Religious Zionism. It exposes doubts and crises, something Hebrew writers have been doing since the days of the *Haskalah*, when many Jews were torn between two worlds.

Shlomzion rebels against her father as well as his religion and wishes to fix the pattern of broken marriages in her family, like Tirzah in Agnon's *Bidmi yameha* (*In the Prime of Her Life*, 1923), which happens to be the name of the town where her daughter goes to seminary and where Yair Berman lives. In Agnon's novella, Tirzah fell in love with her Hebrew teacher (who was once her mother's lover) before her father married her to another man; she reenacted her mother's romantic proposal and likewise rejected a wealthy young suitor.⁸¹ This time we are left with the hope that the pattern of love over two generations will not lead to tragedy. We realize, however, by the end of Elon's novel that the reason Shlomzion cannot not find satisfaction in

yoga and nature treks or in the instant gratification of sex and drugs is because the fire that burns within her will remain an unfulfillable desire until redemption finally comes.

Destination Unknown

The novels by Yaron-Dayan and Govrin imagine the confessional narrative of a young woman who wishes to return to the faith of her forefathers and to recover the kerchief of modesty, but only Alma is certain she has left her former self behind and has become truer to herself and to her femininity. Mirvis and Horn imagine a generational turn toward religion in America, but in Elon's novel the generational return to religion in the next generation is seen by someone who lives as a single secular woman, whose daughter, born of her rebellion, returns to religion and fulfills the ideals in which she herself once believed. For all the differences in context and outlook between these American and Israeli novels, the conflict between carnal and spiritual love is a recurrent theme. This is not surprising in a genre that historically centered on the love plot and which in its postmodern form separated love from sex. The penitent has to fight temptations in a secular society and seek a new identity based on faith (a theme of much recent writing by religious authors). The acceptance of Divine love, however, does not exclude romantic love, as Amalia mistakenly thinks in *The Name*. If the erotic energy of passion can be harnessed to serve God, it can be channeled into a harmonious "trinity" of man, woman, and God (BT Niddah 31b).⁸² Yet, in the tension in these texts between the sexuality and sanctity of the female body, we see that a sex-starved woman brought up in strict segregation from men cannot resist the pull of desire. This is the subject of heartrending stories of dropouts from *haredi* but also Religious Zionist homes who failed to follow the prescribed track of school, seminary, and marriage, in novels by Noa Yaron-Dayan (*Shirah geulah [Redemption Song]*, 2016) and Vered Kellner (*Mineged [Facing Her]*, 2018). These are stories of young women who leave their *haredi* homes after their widowed mother remarries; one finds herself on the streets, the other loses herself in New York.⁸³

The journey in search of self and faith can go in different directions, as Natanella Schlesinger shows in her debut novel *Akharei hama'asim (When the Deed Was Done)*, 2017). From the moment she moves in with them at the beginning of the novel, Noa finds her rigid rules of what is permitted and forbidden challenged by the secular lifestyle of her sister Hadar and her partner Ofir. Schlesinger's novel, like much postmodern Israeli writing, deals with young people who have lost direction. The odyssey does not always come to a final homecoming, but love and marriage are not ruled out as possibilities of self-fulfillment. On the way, conflicts have to be resolved between religious faith and a secular world, in particular challenges of the crossing of boundaries of sexual behavior, which may liberate women from a protected and secluded upbringing but can also make them feel insecure or put them at risk.

In Schlesinger's novel, the sisters each explore a range of identities as they search for their true selves and readjust their relationship with the Torah and with the collective (*klal yisrael*). Hadar, who does not believe in God and has lapsed in her religious observance, is angry at the way young religious women are told they must keep themselves pure for marriage and are instructed to avoid contact with men lest they arouse in them sinful thoughts. After several attempts, Hadar seduces her religious boss Avshalom by stripping naked in his Jacuzzi. Yet, although she tries on a kerchief, she resists his attempts to bring her back to religion and follow the rules. In the parallel plot, her religious sister Noa, who does not believe in sex before marriage, finds herself sharing a sleeping bag with Hadar's partner Ofir when trapped during a storm in a cave. Unable to deny her attraction to Ofir, she breaks off her engagement with Amikhai, who is trying to strengthen his faith and who runs a study house devoted to embodied Judaism. After showing Noa's inner struggles with the boundaries which her religious upbringing and *ulpana* education have set as well as her struggle with conflicting emotions and values, the novel concludes with the prospect of romantic adventure that awaits the lovers when Noa sneaks onto the same flight to South Africa as Ofir. The final destination, it seems, will always be unknown.

Notes

- 1 See Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Tova Hartman Halbertal, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007); Dina Pinsky, *Jewish Feminists: Complex Identities and Activist Lives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
- 2 Yaacov Yadgar, *Secularism and Religion in Jewish-Israeli Politics: Traditionists and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 171–87. On the tensions with secular values of beauty and materialism, see Lea Taragin-Zeller, "Between Modesty and Beauty: Reinterpreting Female Piety in the Israeli Haredi Community," in *Love, Marriage, and Jewish Families: Paradoxes of a Social Revolution*, ed. Sylvia Barack Fishman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015), 308–26.
- 3 On the stereotype of the Jewish American Princess, see Carol Zemel, *Looking Jewish: Visual Culture and Modern Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 104–36; Riv-Ellen Prell, "Why Jewish Princesses Don't Sweat: Desire and Consumption in Postwar American Jewish Culture," in *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New York: The Jewish Museum, and Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 74–92; revised as "Cinderellas Who (Almost) Never Become Princesses: Subversive Representations of Jewish Women in Postwar Popular Novels," in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 123–38; Rhonda Lieberman, "Jewish Barbie," in *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New York: The Jewish Museum and Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 108–13.
- 4 On misrepresentation of *haredi* women in popular culture, see Karen E. H. Skinnazi, *Women of Valor: Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters, Crime Writers, and Rock Stars in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 140–73.

- 5 Larry Davis is drawing on a dark humor in American Jewish stand-up comedy that ridicules secular as well as religious Jews; here, the joke is just as much on assimilated Jews in a long exchange of views on masturbation. See Vincent Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003). By contrast, the enormously popular Israeli TV comedy series *Shababnikim* (2017–), about some wayward yeshiva boys, avoids stereotypes, though it has little in common with real life.
- 6 See Valeria Seigelshifer and Tova Hartman, “The Emergence of Israeli Orthodox Women Filmmakers,” *Shofar* 38, no. 2 (2020): 125–61; Marylin Vinig, *Hakolno'a hakharedi* [Orthodox Cinema] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2011); Yaron Peleg, *Directed by God: Jewishness in Contemporary Israeli Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016); Dan Chyutin, “Negotiating Judaism in Contemporary Israeli Cinema: The Spiritual Style of *My Father, My Lord*,” in *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, ed. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin: University of Texas, 2011), 201–12. Rachel S. Harris discusses religious filmmakers’ attempts to change the paradigm of secular male prejudiced views of women’s restricted lives in the closed *haredi* world in her study *Warriors, Witches, Whores: Women in Israeli Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 91–108. See also Skinazi, *Women of Valor*, 187–209, 217–18. On the *halakhic* and cinematic dilemmas facing religious Jewish feminist filmmakers when they tackle issues of marriage, divorce, or ritual immersion, see Yael Shenker, “Capturing the Gaze in Film: Feminist Critiques of Jewish and Islamic Orthodoxy in Israel and Iran,” *Critical Research on Religion* 6, no. 2 (2018): 113–31.
- 7 I am discussing novels for the general readership, not *haredi* women’s novels written for a specific religious audience to bolster faith or demonstrate the workings of divine providence, though these too sometimes discuss weighty issues of Jewish identity; see Yael Shenker, “Choosing One’s Life Identity Swapping Plots in Popular Fiction by Israeli Haredi Women,” *Israel Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 189–212.
- 8 See Ruth Wisse’s critique of Cynthia Ozick’s and Hugh Nissenson’s misappropriation of the traditional Jewish past, “American Jewish Writing, Act II,” *Commentary* (June 1976): 40–45. On Saul Bellow’s antipathy toward traditional Judaism in “The Old System,” see Ezra Cappell, *American Talmud: The Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 63–72.
- 9 Wendy Shalit, “The Observant Reader,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2005 (book review section). For a critique of this essay, see Sara R. Horowitz, “Mediating Judaism: Mind, Body, Spirit, and Contemporary North American Jewish Fiction,” *AJS Review* 30, no. 2 (2006): 231–53. On the representation of religious Jews in American Jewish fiction, see Nora L. Rubel, *Doubting the Devout: The Ultra-Orthodox in the Jewish American Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- 10 Ari Shapiro, interview with Nathan Englander, “The Internet May Be Just As Omniscient as God in *kaddish.com*,” *NPR* April 3, 2019; <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/03/709204983/the-internet-may-be-just-as-omniscient-as-god-in-kaddish-com>.
- 11 Nathan Englander, *kaddish.com* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019), e-book edition, 68; italics in original.
- 12 Englander, *kaddish.com*, 72.
- 13 Englander, *kaddish.com*, 76.
- 14 Habermas, “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 17–29.
- 15 Jessica Lang, “Between Us: Intimacy in Women’s Off-the-Derech Memoirs,” in *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*, ed. Ezra Cappell and Jessica Lang (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 177–95.

- 16 See on “off-the-*derekh*” novels, Skinazi, *Women of Valor*, 30–74; Avinoam Patt, “A Guide for the Heretic: Charting the Path Off the Path of Tradition,” in *The New Jewish American Literary Studies*, ed. Victoria Aarons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 169–93. On the phenomenon of “exiting” from strictly religious Jewish communities, see the memoirs and studies in Ezra Cappell and Jessica Lang, eds., *Off the Derech*; for a sociological study of former followers of Lubavitch and Satmar, see Schneur Zalman Newfield, *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2020).
- 17 Reva Mann, *The Rabbi’s Daughter: A True Story of Sex, Drugs and Orthodoxy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007), 244.
- 18 Leah Vincent, “The Trickster Bride,” in *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*, ed. Ezra Cappell and Jessica Lang (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 107.
- 19 Vincent, “Trickster Bride,” 110; emphasis in the original.
- 20 For a sociological analysis of why some *haredi* religious Jews leave the community, see Roni Berger, “The Journey of Leaving an Insular Community: The Case of Ultra-Orthodox Jews,” *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 1–2 (2014): 75–98. On the experience of rebelling against a strictly religious Jewish community, see Hella Winston, *Unchosen: The Lives of Hasidic Rebels* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005); Lynn Davidman, *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Faranak Margolese, *Off the Derech: Why Observant Jews Leave Judaism* (Jerusalem: Devora, 2005); Marta F. Topel, *Jewish Orthodoxy and Its Discontents: Religious Dissidence in Contemporary Israel* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012). For a story of leaving a Hasidic home that tells of reconciliation and accommodation rather than confrontation and antagonism, see Chaya Deitsch, *Here and There: Leaving Hasidism, Keeping My Family* (New York: Schocken, 2015).
- 21 For example, the salacious cover of Leah Vincent’s *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation after My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2014).
- 22 Rachel S. Harris and Karen E. H. Skinazi, “Was I Afraid to Get Up and Speak My Mind? No, I Wasn’t: The Feminism and Art of Jewish Orthodox and Haredi Women,” *Shofar* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 3–4; see, for example, Rachel Freier, “Orthodox Judge Freier responds to Netflix’s *Unorthodox*,” <https://www.israel-nationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/279835>; viewed May 17, 2020.
- 23 For a critique of feminists’ use of Christian anti-Semitism in their attack on “Jewish” patriarchy, see Judith Plaskow, “Blaming the Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy,” in *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck, revised edition (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989), 298–302.
- 24 See Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).
- 25 Debra Renee Kaufman, *Rachel’s Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).
- 26 Quoted in Kaufman, *Rachel’s Daughters*, 8.
- 27 Kaufman, *Rachel’s Daughters*, 9–10.
- 28 See the statistics in Carole J. Sheffield, “Sexual Terrorism,” in *Gender Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Laura L. O’Toole, Jessica R. Schiffman, and Margie L. Kiter Edwards, second edition (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 120.
- 29 Kaufman, *Rachel’s Daughters*, 10–11.
- 30 See Rachel S. Harris, “Sex, Violence, Motherhood, and Modesty: Controlling the Jewish Woman and Her Body,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 23 (Spring-Fall 5772-3/2012): 5–10; Ayala Fader, *Mitzvah Girls*:

- Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Yehuda Henkin, *Understanding Tzniut: Modern Controversies in the Jewish Community* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2008); Jonathan S. Marion, "Seeing and Being in Contemporary Orthodox Dress," in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Jewish Cultures*, ed. Laurence Roth and Nadia Valman (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 297–307. For a critique of Western popular culture that associates modesty with religious oppression and expects women to display their sexuality in the name of freedom, see Oriah Mevurakh, *Ma at mevakeshet? [What Do You Seek?]* (Jerusalem: Magid, 2020). Inspired by Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), religious Jewish women have discussed the issues they face in a promiscuous society in Rivka Cohen et al., *Monologues from the Makom: Intertwined Narratives of Sexuality, Gender, Body Image, and Jewish Identity* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2020).
- 31 Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 49.
- 32 Naomi Seidman, *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 296–97; Debra R. Kaufman, "Engendering Orthodoxy: Newly Orthodox Women and Hasidism," in *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America*, ed. Janet S. Belcove-Shalin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 135–60; see the comparison of gender and sex in Hasidic and fundamentalist Christian sects, Lynn Davidman and Janet Stocks, "Varieties of Fundamentalist Experience: Lubavitch Hasidic and Fundamentalist Christian Approaches to Contemporary Family Life," in *New World Hasidim*, 107–33.
- 33 Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 107.
- 34 Blu Greenberg attests to the diversity of the Modern Orthodox community when she admits that she, like other women in her community, does not cover her hair except for Sabbath candle-lighting (*How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* [Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1983], 186–88). In Judaism, the onus is just as much on the man not to look and not to covet, although women are often taught that they are responsible not to put temptation in men's way and cause them to sin with their eyes. See, for example, Melanie Landau, *Tradition and Equality in Jewish Marriage: Beyond the Sanctification of Subordination* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012); Ethan Tucker and Michael Rosenberg, *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law* (Brooklyn, NY: KTAV Publishing, 2017).
- 35 Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*, 132–36.
- 36 See Adam S. Ferziger, "Beyond Bais Ya'akov: Orthodox Outreach and the Emergence of Haredi Women as Religious Leaders," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 14, no. 1 (2015): 140–59. See also the confessional essays on reconciling feminism and Orthodox Jewish practice by rebellious Jewish daughters from Riot Grrrls to haredi seminaries in Danya Rutenberg, ed., *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism* (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 2001).
- 37 See Yohai Hakak, *Haredi Masculinities between the Yeshiva, the Army, Work and Politics: The Sage, the Warrior and the Entrepreneur*, trans. Myriam Ron (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
- 38 Mirvis, "Writing between Worlds," in *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America*, ed. Evelyn Avery (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 245.
- 39 Tova Mirvis, *The Book of Separation: A Memoir* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), xii.
- 40 Helene Meyers, *Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 19–20.
- 41 See Judith Lewin, "Diving into the Wreck: Binding Oneself to Judaism in Contemporary Jewish Women's Fiction," *Shofar* 26, no. 3 (2008): 48–67; Jacobowitz,

- “Hardly There Even When She Wasn’t Lost,” 255–63; Rachel S. Harris, “From Feminist to Housewife and Back Again: Orthodoxy and Modernity in American Jewish Women’s Writing,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction*, ed. David Brauner and Axel Stähler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 76–89; Rubel, *Doubting the Devout*, 109–46. See also Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegal, eds., *Daughters of Valor: Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997).
- 42 Evelyn Avery, “On Being Modern and Orthodox: A Conversation with Tova Mirvis,” in *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America*, ed. Evelyn Avery, 249–53; Skinazi, *Women of Valor*, 170–71.
- 43 Mirvis, *The Book of Separation*, 156–57.
- 44 For a theological reading of this novel, see Ruth Illman, “Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn’s Novel *In the Image*,” in *Adam and Eve Story in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Antti Laato and Lotta Valve (Turku: Åbo Akademi University/Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 347–71.
- 45 Dara Horn, *In the Image* (New York: Norton, 2002), 47–48.
- 46 Katherine Weber also features this legend in her popular novel *Triangle* (2006), about the traumatic experiences of a young immigrant woman caught in the famous Triangle Shirtwaist fire, another example of myth being appropriated to show rejection of Judaism from a twenty-first-century perspective. In a Levinasian reading of Horn’s novel, Monica Osborne interprets Mr. Rosenthal’s commission to retrieve the *tefillin* as a symbolic challenge to renew the covenant in the face of a generational rejection of religion (*The Midrashic Impulse and the Contemporary Literary Response to Trauma* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018], 117–45).
- 47 See Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, “The Opposite of Jewish: On Remembering and Keeping in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction,” *Shofar* 25, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 72–90.
- 48 Caroline Rody, “The Magical Book within the Book: I. B. Singer, Bruno Schulz, and Contemporary Jewish Post-Holocaust Fiction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier (Cham: Palgrave, 2020), 345.
- 49 “Displacement and Jewish Identity: Magical Realism in the Novels of Dara Horn,” *Symbolism: An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics* 12–13 (2013): 150–69.
- 50 Tsila Abramovitz Ratner, “Discourses of Negotiation: The Writings of Orthodox Women in Israel,” in *Gender and Israeli Society*, ed. Hannah Neveh (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), 139–68; Barbara Ann Landress, *Her Glory All Within: Rejecting and Transforming Orthodoxy in Israeli and American Jewish Women’s Fiction* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012). See also Skinazi, *Women of Valor*, 13–14.
- 51 Yael S. Feldman, *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women’s Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 5–6.
- 52 Feldman, *No Room of Their Own*, 10–11.
- 53 Ratner, “Discourses of Negotiation,” 139–68.
- 54 Noa Yaron-Dayan, *Mekimi* (Tel Aviv: ’Am ’Oved, 2007), 12.
- 55 Yaron-Dayan, *Mekimi*, 23.
- 56 Yaron-Dayan, *Mekimi*, 31.
- 57 Yaron-Dayan, *Mekimi*, 52.
- 58 Yaron-Dayan, *Mekimi*, 95. My translation.
- 59 Yaron-Dayan, *Mekimi*, 110–11.
- 60 Yaron-Dayan, *Mekimi*, 166–67; *Tehillim*, trans. Rabbi Avraham Chaim Feuer, volume 2, 1638–39. Compare the prayer of Hannah, Samuel 1, 2:8.

- 61 Yaron-Dayana, *Mekimi*, 270. My translation.
- 62 Yaron-Dayana, *Mekimi*, 311.
- 63 Yaron-Dayana, *Mekimi*, 315.
- 64 Michal Govrin, *The Name*, trans. Barbara Harshav (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998); *Hashem* (Tel Aviv: Hakibuts hameukhad, 1995).
- 65 Dina Wardi, *Nosei hakhotem: Dialog æim bnei hador hasheni lashoah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990), English translation: *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- 66 Govrin, *The Name*, 185–86; *Hashem*, 176–77.
- 67 Govrin, *The Name*, 4; *Hashem*, 9. Italics in the original.
- 68 Govrin, *The Name*, 193–99; *Hashem*, 184–89.
- 69 Govrin, *The Name*, 297; *Hashem*, 280.
- 70 Govrin, *The Name*, 299; *Hashem*, 282.
- 71 Rachel F. Brenner, “How To Mend Love? Wrestling with the Legacy of the Holocaust in Recent Israeli Fiction,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 4, no. 1 (March 2005): 90–93.
- 72 David Shapiro, Michal Govrin, and Jacques Derrida, *Body of Prayer: Written Words, Voices*, ed. Kim Shkapich (New York: Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture, 2001). The transcript of Govrin’s address at this public symposium and Derrida’s response are printed on facing pages with Govrin’s journal of her journey to Poland and Derrida’s *Circonfession*. See pp. 70–73 above for an example of Govrin’s embodied writing in *Snapshots*.
- 73 Shapiro et al., *Body of Prayer*, 21. See Michal Govrin, “Journey to Poland,” trans. Barbara Harshav, *Partisan Review* (Fall 1999): 555–73.
- 74 Nitza Keren, “In the Name of the Mother: Women’s Discourse—Women’s Prayer in Michal Govrin’s *The Name*,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 10 (2005): 126–53.
- 75 One disappointed reader was Hillel Weiss; see his essay “‘Etsev gadol baarets: Mavo lesifrut hadatlashim beheksher sifrah hekhdashah shel emunah elon” [“A Great Sadness in the Land: Introduction to Religious Zionist Fiction in the Context of the New Book by Emunah Elon”], *Nativ* 100 (2004): 99–104.
- 76 See p. 37 above for a comparison of Zeruya Shalev’s *Ya’ara* with Agnon’s *Tirzah*. Agnon more than once used the trope of love for ambivalent or frustrated relationships with the Land of Israel, for example, the play of betrayal and return to the Land in *A Guest for the Night*, which tested personal and literary freedom. In his novella *Shevu’at ne’emanim (Betrothed)*, set during the Second Aliyah, Agnon responded to the Zionist allegory of love for the Land in an ambiguous and complex play of the betrothal oath and sensuous love, art and science, and traditional and secular interpretations of the Song of Songs: seven maidens, athletic beauties of the Land of Israel, compete for Jacob, a botany professor from Austria, who promises his heart to his childhood love, Susan, the daughter of a wealthy European Jew, who is suffering from sleeping sickness and who returns to the diaspora. The kabalistic connotations of these figures similarly suggest love of the Land and yearning for the *Shekhinah*, but the resolution of the conflict does not necessarily point toward redemption. See Ilana Pardes, *Agnon’s Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 66–95; Shirli Sela-Levavi, “‘As He Had Betrayed the Land, So He Betrayed His Betrothed’: Erotic Love, Nationalism, and Authorship in *A Guest for the Night*,” *Hebrew Studies* 58 (2017): 383–400; Nitza Ben-Dov, *Agnon’s Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).
- 77 Emunah Elon, *If You Awaken Love*, trans. David Hazony (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2007), 30; *Simkhah gdolah bashamayim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2004), 36.

- 78 Elon, *If You Awaken Love*, 54; *Simkhah gdolah bashamayim*, 58.
- 79 Elon, *If You Awaken Love*, 108; *Simkhah gdolah bashamayim*, 107. We will see a different treatment of the *hineni* in Abraham's response to the call of God in Chapter 5.
- 80 Orit Avishai, "Imagining 'The Orthodox' in Emunah Elon's *Heaven Rejoices: Voyeuristic, Reformist, and Pedagogical Orthodox Artistic Expression*," *Israel Studies* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 60–61.
- 81 On this recurrent pattern, see Chapter 1 and Yael Halevi-Wise, "The 'Double Triangle' Paradigm: National Redemption in Bi-generational Love Triangles from Agnon to Oz," *Prooftexts* 26 (2006): 312, 329–33.
- 82 On the new trend of sex education with its emphasis on sexual pleasure in Orthodox Jewish and Evangelical Christian communities which convey the message that religion is good for sex and good sex is good for religion, see Orit Avishai and Kelsy Burke, "God's Case for Sex," *Contexts* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 30–35. See also Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1980); Raphael Aron, *Spirituality & Intimacy: Where Heaven and Love Meet* (White Plains, NY: Mosaica Press, 2016). For Talmudic views on sexuality and desire, see Naftali Rothenberg, *Rabbi Akiva's Philosophy of Love* (New York and Houndmills: Palgrave, 2017). Among many Jewish sex manuals and self-help guides in Hebrew and English from a *halakhic* standpoint is Shmuley Boteach, *Kosher Sex: A Recipe for Passion and Intimacy*, 20th Anniversary edition (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2019).
- 83 By contrast, Pninah Aharon's confessional memoir *Khasufah bifanekha* [*Naked before You*], (2017) tells how the author worked in a nightclub before finding God and love. Another confessional memoir that follows the ups and downs of a female penitent in finding her way to religion is the story of an actress who becomes a *haredi* woman, Avital Keshet, *Lifnei veakharei bivnei brak siti* [*Before and After in Bnei Brak City*] (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot akhronot, 2015).

5 Destroying Israel

The World Seen from Its End

Israel has been the most unifying and the most divisive force among Jews in recent times. And yet, whatever disagreement there is about Israeli government policies, there is no doubt that the establishment of a Jewish state has transformed the way we think and talk about Jews and Jewishness. In fact, the emergence of Israel as a modern sovereign state has led to a normalization of Jewish history and posed the question of whether the diaspora has a future or whether it has become a separate entity.¹ The proliferation of book titles or symposia from 1945 to the present with a question mark over the “future” or “end” of Israel and/or of the Jewish people should make us ask what kind of discourse is being framed around the very existence of Israel and indeed of the Jewish people.² A popular Israeli joke after Nasser’s closure of the Straits of Tiran in May 1967, when the destruction of Israel seemed imminent, was, “will the last person to leave, please turn out the lights?”—a joke taken up in a new post-Zionist context in Nathan Englander’s novel *Dinner at the Center of the Earth*.³ The destruction of Israel has returned not as a distant nightmare, but as an acceptable reality: a *haredi* journalist wrote in 2017, “Already a decade ago, less than half of American Jews under 35 said they would view the destruction of Israel as a personal tragedy.”⁴

Although much has changed in the twenty-first century, with a tremendous revival of Jewish culture and a steady return to religion but also a resurgence of populist anti-Semitism, the rhetoric of the “end of the Jewish people” and the prediction of the inevitable death of Israel persists, despite the Abrahamic peace treaties of 2020 and a pro-Israel US administration. After 70 years, one would have thought that it is ridiculous to doubt the future of Israel, which has defiantly survived Begin’s apocalyptic warnings and defied Iran’s genocidal threats. Yet the replacement of Israel with a Palestinian Arab state is taken for granted in the imagined future in contemporary Israeli and American Jewish literature, not just in Palestinian Arab utopian fiction. The notorious anti-Israel activist Gilad Atzmon’s science fiction fantasy *Moreh nevukhim* (2001; *Guide to the Perplexed*, 2002), for

example prophecies that 40 years after the dismantling of Israel, only a few fanatics will remain and cling to the land they claimed as theirs. Existential anxiety is understandable, given waves of suicide bombers and persistent threats of extinction, which led Israelis and Jews around the world to fear the next boom might be explosive and not economic. Writers who have tired of the stalled peace process have tended to internalize the security situation and to share the general post-Holocaust and post-apocalyptic despair of Western culture. Another factor is a secular left-wing disillusion in Israel's utopian ideals. Jewish American writers see in the fantasy of the destruction of Israel an opportunity to act out their alienation from an identity associated with the bogey of postcolonialism and to assert politically correct liberal positions, but also to redefine their otherness in multicultural America and reclaim diaspora as the true Jewish homeland.⁵ As we saw in Chapter 3, politics is inextricably entangled with sex, and the disillusion in ideals comes in tandem with the disappointment in love.

Post-Zionists in Israel and neo-liberal American Jews constantly repeat the mantra that under pressure of right-wing nationalism Israel will turn to extremist messianic fanaticism and claim the Holy Land for the Jews at any price, resorting to violence in order to bring the final redemption, as in Motti Lerner's 1987 play, *Khevei mashiakh (Birth-Pangs of the Messiah)*, Yishai Sarid's novel *Hashlishi (The Third Temple)*, (2015), or Tova Reich's novel *The Jewish War* (1995). These dystopian imaginings of the near future, like Lavie Tidhar's alternate history fantasy *Unholy Land* (2018), bring us back to the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel of destruction in punishment for Israel's sins, though here these are the mortal sins of occupation of territory which will bring disaster. In taking up eschatological visions of Armageddon which speak of a *necessary* destruction, a concept we will meet more than once in this chapter, secular left-wing rhetoric, as Adam Rovner suggests, inverts the failed promise of redemption or questions its meaning.⁶ Zionist leaders saw the end of diaspora as inevitable and interpreted the establishment of a Jewish state as the rebirth of the Jewish people from centuries of persecution, from an abnormal existence in the diaspora. Yet, post-Zionist writers understand the wars for Israel's survival as a stage in the realization of the dire prediction of the critics of Zionism that violent conflict will necessarily lead to Israel's destruction and to disaster for the Jews. The basis of necessary destruction follows Schopenhauer's outlook of eternal suffering in a post-Nietzschean skepticism that doubts the endless cycle of disaster can ever be fixed. Impending disaster was a firm belief embedded in Western culture after World War One, and Walter Benjamin understood the present was catastrophic. In his vision of the Angel of History driven by the storm into the future but facing the past, redemption arises from the ruins of history, not as its result.⁷

Israel was established as the Jewish national home and served as a refuge for a persecuted people, who (with very few exceptions) were denied sanctuary from an unprecedented genocide; in addition to thousands of destitute

Holocaust survivors, some of whom arrived illegally, a further 800,000 Jewish refugees arrived from Muslim countries, where they had been harassed, dispossessed, and expelled. Yet, what can be said about the Jewish State when a refuge is no longer needed or when there are other places of refuge? Or when the state of Israel becomes an immigrant refuge and asylum for unwanted Africans, who raise the specter of racism but also evoke solidarity? The Israeli writer and academic Adi Sorek sees in the concept of refuge the roots of Jewish rootlessness. Indeed, what would be the identity of Jews if there had been no state of Israel or if it was destroyed? These questions underlie the novels to be discussed in this chapter, which engage with notions of refuge in a globalized world of migrations and diasporas, but also with the notion of home, especially when the ground on which the family stands has been swept from under their feet, literally so in the subversive photography of Israeli artist Meirav Heiman, for example *Trampoline* (2010), which follows trends in contemporary photography that break down the boundaries of intimacy and show happy families to be anything but happy (see her “Untitled” in the frontispiece to this book).⁸ Alongside attempts to recover the redemptive narrative in the return to religion (described in the previous chapter), some contemporary Israeli and American Jewish writers no longer hold as a sacred truth the basic assumption that Jews share a homeland or they no longer take “home” for granted as a place where one feels one belongs. The impending end deconstructs the meaning of home and introduces postmodern alternatives to the Western nuclear family and particularly the Jewish traditional family.⁹

Diasporism has a long and familiar history, and it is still sometimes proposed as an alternate Jewish history more in keeping with postcolonial discourse than Zionism. Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock* (1993) mocked diasporism and presented a fictional “Philip Roth,” the narrator’s double, who calls for the Jewish people to return to Europe, given the inevitability of Israel’s destruction. Rereading Roth’s *Operation Shylock* a decade later, after the Second Intifada, the New York journalist Ron Rosenbaum observed that Roth’s fictional fantasy of a “Second Holocaust” and the Roth-double’s proposal to “return” Jews to Europe were now all the more real, given European hypocrisy in its support for Palestinian Arab militant groups while condemning Israel when it was attacked by terrorists. “The Second Holocaust. It’s a phrase we may have to begin thinking about. A possibility we may have to contemplate. A reality we may have to witness.”¹⁰ With the declared intention of Iran to destroy Israel and the potential of a nuclear arsenal aimed at Israeli cities, Rosenbaum declared that this time Israel would not rely on its friends or allies but would strike alone to defend itself in a scenario of a regional or global conflagration.¹¹ This “second Holocaust” syndrome arises from the anxiety of secular Jews such as Rosenbaum (author of *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*) that Israel might not be able to withstand the combined onslaught of European sanctions and terrorist attacks. Writing in 2015, after hundreds of rockets fell

on civilians in Israel and Jews were being attacked in France, Belgium, and Sweden, Rosenbaum (who identified himself as a liberal Obama supporter) declared he was the new Jeremiah: "I believe the State of Israel might not survive. That its days are numbered. I can hardly bear to say it."¹² This lamentation for the destruction of Israel sounds a warning to stop the flood of anti-Jewish hatred before it is too late.

Although it is never easy to decide what is fake and what is authentic in Roth's postmodern parody of diasporism, in *Operation Shylock* the wish to revert to the extraterritoriality of exile reflects a bifurcation in American Jewish identity.¹³ That exilic condition is what George Steiner called (borrowing the phrase from Heine) the Jews' portable homeland, which is the text of a diaspora culture. That is an old idea. For example, when Jewish territoriality was being mooted at the Versailles conference after World War One, sociologist Thorstein Veblen, in his 1919 essay "The Intellectual Pre-Eminence of Jews in Modern Europe," advocated the legitimacy and indeed the benefit of exile as a privileged situation that afforded the Jews intellectual and cultural achievements because of the advantage of living among the gentiles as Others. This anti-Zionist and anti-exclusivist argument has been taken up by Judith Butler and others who believe the roots of Jewish rootlessness lie in their diaspora condition, threatened by Zionist narratives of "home" that come with cultural and political claims and construct a collective entity from which Butler wishes to disassociate. If Zionism is a discourse of arrival home, the construct of a global diaspora offers a discourse of wandering and non-arrival. We will see in this chapter examples of Jewishness as a nomadic existence of homelessness, which is hardly a new motif in modern Jewish writing but now bases itself on the notion that the exilic tradition is what makes Jews Jewish. Some Jewish intellectuals, from Jacqueline Rose in *The Question of Zion* to Judith Butler in *Parting Ways*, have employed this logic to insist on their right not to be "represented" by Israel and have detached the diaspora from Israel as an extraterritorial Jewish space. Now that Israel is a reality, indeed an astounding success story, it is unsettling that diaspora has been reformulated not just as an alternate, but as the true Jewish homeland that gives meaning to exile as a place of fertile dispersal, not of disastrous expulsion. This reversal of the religious and Zionist redemptive narratives turns Jewish suffering into an exemplary experience of significance for all minorities, and instead of a punishment or an abnormality, exile becomes natural to the human condition.¹⁴

In some post-Zionist views, the existence of Israel threatens the ideological basis of a diaspora Jewishness as well as physically endangering Jews by increasing the risk of terrorist attacks or general hostility against Israel and against Jews around the world. Notwithstanding the widespread consensus among world Jewry after the Holocaust that the State of Israel gave them hope for the continuity of the Jewish people, historian Michael Brenner points out that, following the Six Day War, the sudden outburst of excited jubilation and solidarity turned into growing moral or political doubts in

the Zionist project; support of Israel was no longer unquestioning or taken for granted.¹⁵ Nowadays, it is quite common for liberal progressive Jews to support a human rights discourse which criticizes Israel as a criminal rogue state accused of stealing someone else's homeland and committing countless crimes on a daily basis. The postcolonial discourse of transnational identities, moreover, leaves Jews on the defensive for belonging to a particularistic group, a "chosen people" that has an atavistic and xenophobic outlook.

Neo-Marxist critics contend that the nation-state was not a natural or organic development but was based on a myth that bolstered colonialism, and revisionist historians such as Benny Morris turned to the narrative of the Palestinian Arab refugees as an alternative to the official Zionist historiography. Émigré revisionists Ilan Pappé and Shlomo Sand then deconstructed the Zionist "return to the Land" and questioned the notion of sovereignty as a natural right claimed by Jews. Not all post-Zionist or anti-Zionist historians denied Jews had a right to sovereignty, but the reigning dogma of a "Diaspora Nation" speaks of a non-territorial people. If yearning for the Land drove belief in Zionism, only exile (in the spirit of Walter Benjamin's weak powers of redemption) could preserve that *raison d'être* by perpetuating yearning for an unrealized end of exile. In a key essay "Exile within Sovereignty" (1993), Israeli scholar Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin set the trend for understanding exile as the fulfillment of Jewish identity in the historical discourse about Zionism, which, according to him, negated not so much the diaspora as the history of exile, and in its return to history eradicated the "oriental" Jew. If only exile formed the basis of homeland instead of the nation-state, he argued, the Arab-Israeli conflict could be solved.¹⁶ Moreover, against the background of the Oslo Accords and a wave of critical thinking influenced by the concept of diasporism based on a non-territorial Judaism in the work of Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, influential theorists such as Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran expressed discomfort with the idea of being at home or native in the Land of Israel or seeing it as their own place in the world.¹⁷ There is a rhetorical loop here, fueled by the logic of its own revisionism, which denies any possibility of futurity and detaches the individual from the collective, yet denies its obsolescence as history has stubbornly moved on and other forms of criticism of Israel's neo-liberal capitalism have replaced both post-Zionism and postmodernism.

The moral qualms of some intellectuals, however, do not stop there. The use of power to establish and defend a nation-state condemned around the world as "racist" has discomfited critics of Israel. When Jews have both sovereignty and muscle, power becomes the subject of ethical doubts.¹⁸ Indeed, some Jews on the left who support principles of humanism, diversity, and multiculturalism fear that the Jews' recently gained agency in history and control over their own destiny put them on the wrong side of political correctness. In an assessment of the continuing stalled peace process, one American commentator puts it: "What Israelis see before them is a choice between the physical destruction wrought by war and the moral destruction

wrought by forever dominating a people that, if allowed, would destroy them. For these Israelis, it's a choiceless choice."¹⁹ That "choiceless choice" is a motif of the prognosis of Jewish history in the novels discussed in this chapter.

Postmodern alternate histories play out the contingency of historical events that depend on chance yet have far-reaching repercussions (like the butterfly effect in chaos theory). Jewish writers have used the "what if" of alternate histories to subvert the assumptions underlying our understanding of history—as in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), which imagined a fascist America allied with Nazi Germany to shake American Jews' assumptions about their identity, above all their complacency that it could never have happened in America.²⁰ Alternate histories fantasize a fictional development of history that did not or has not yet happened, whereas a counter-factual history speculates about what would have happened if things had happened differently. These counter-histories question human agency in history (which Joseph Heller famously called a trash bag of random coincidences torn open by the wind). This is a genre that subverts the ideological underpinnings of historiography and often issues dire warnings to avert future disasters in a thought experiment of what might happen.²¹ Counter-factual and alternate histories in which the establishment of the Jewish state or the Holocaust didn't happen (for example, historian Jeffrey Gurrock's *The Holocaust Averted: An Alternate History of American Jewry, 1938–1967*, 2015) provide an opportunity to reconsider the real circumstances of diaspora Jewry and use a "what if" situation to speculate not just on what might have happened, but also why things happened as they did. This questions the historiographical and ideological narrative and makes us reconsider the turning points in historical narratives that are too often taken for granted. An example is Israeli author Yair Hasdiel's alternate history novel *Tel Aviv* (2012), in which, in a reversal of history, Zionism failed and the hero makes a nostalgic trip to the site of the destroyed Tel Aviv (which was named for the Hebrew translation of Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland*). In American Jewish novelist Joshua Cohen's alternate history fantasy novel *Witz* (2010), a plague wipes out all Jews but one, Benjamin Israelien, whose existence belies the authenticity of the "Jewish" identity adopted by many Gentiles, the new chosen people, and thus calls into question post-assimilation Jewish identity as a prolonged Jewish joke (a "witz"). Cohen starts out with the premise that it is too late for salvation in the permanent condition of exile when the last Jews have literally missed the boat because they typically made excuses to delay their flight to safety. The normalcy of a Jewish state on the one hand or of the Jewish experience in America on the other leaves some Jews feeling it cannot last, given a history of catastrophe, extermination, and deportation.

At the same time, in a post-apocalyptic world, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem becomes the ur-event that merges in the literary imagination with 9/11 as a universal narrative of cosmic and personal disaster.

In Ruby Namdar's novel set in New York, *Habayit asher nekharav* (2013; *The Ruined House*, 2017), a Jewish professor Andrew B. Cohen suffers the ruin of both his career and his masculinity, while horrific visions push him into repentance for sins against those whom he loved but also against the Jewish people. Namdar skillfully blends the national narrative, including pages from the Talmudic account of the Day of Atonement service in the Temple, with the personal story of an Israeli professor in New York facing prostate surgery, who must come to terms with the destruction of his manhood, but also with his responsibility in collective destiny, beginning with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jewish people. The effect of the multi-petaled narrative is to introduce sacred texts on personal and universal levels into the contemporary present destruction of the World Trade Center. As Rody observes, the metatextual perspective places the postmodern secular Jew firmly within the metanarrative of national destruction from which there is no escape.²² Amir Eshel has spelled out the unmasking, already in modernity, of Western mythologies of progress which kept at bay the consciousness that unavoidable disaster was around the corner.²³ In our post-apocalyptic, post-9/11 catastrophic world, one can ask if there is any futurity to contemplate.

Devastation at personal and national levels characterizes the aesthetic of the postmodern dystopia. We will see in a novel by Howard Jacobson that it is a small step from anti-Semitism in the present to a post-apocalyptic future where there are no more Jews. The existential threats to the collective and individual conjure up for Michael Chabon (in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*) and Jonathan Safran Foer (in *Here I Am*) the specter of Jewish messianism and the dangerous idea of restoring the Temple, a sure guarantee of war and violence, for which all Jews would be blamed. Yet it could all have been different, as we will see in alternate histories by Nava Semel and Eshkol Nevo, which avert a Zionist state or place it elsewhere in order to critique the failure of idealism and posit a different scenario more in keeping with liberal-progressive humanist principles. What can be salvaged from disaster is a reconstituted Jewish space, but one that might be no more than just an escape from history.

The Disappearance of the Jews: Lost in Dystopia

In the title of Jacobson's novel, *𐤅* (2014), the letter J is printed with a double strike to signal a double erasure. In speech, two fingers cross the mouth when the unspeakable J-word is referred to. It is a word that appears not once throughout the novel. The Jews have disappeared, but they exist under erasure, like the undertone Devorah Baum describes in contemporary Britain when the J-word is mentioned.²⁴ Or like the vanished German Jews under Hitler, whose passports were stamped with a large red J, but were simply erased from the German social landscape. In Jacobson's novel, society has repressed all memory and discourages dwelling on the past, resulting in an

identity no less distorted than Max's in Jacobson's earlier novel *Kalooki Nights* (2006), where, to the opposite extreme, the J-word is a compulsive obsession. In Jacobson's J , the catastrophe has already happened, though it is denied, and it happened in England. Sometime in the future, in a rugged coastal landscape, the remaining survivors of Jewish origin are (like assimilated British Jews after the Holocaust) keeping a low profile, self-conscious of their ugliness, of their not fitting in, and of having no roots, but not fully aware of the causes for their difference after their ethnic group has disappeared.

In explaining what it would be like after the end of the Jewish people, Jacobson comes close to describing a familiar post-Holocaust scenario of living after irreparable destruction and renewed, politically correct anti-Semitism in a post-apocalyptic survivalism. In their rural cottages facing the roaring sea, Kevern Cohen and Ailinn Solomons eke out a paranoiac existence, mistrustful of their feelings and continually testing each other. Kevern "Coco" Cohen fears worse to come. Brought up in an orphanage and then by adoptive parents, Ailinn feels like the whale pursued by Ishmael in Melville's *Moby Dick*. This is ironic because of the name of Operation Ishmael that years ago put an end to the turmoil in the cities following mob violence which wiped out the "enclaves" of "alien influences." That culling of the last Jews evidently arose from what Detective Inspector Gutkind's great-grandfather Clarence Worthing called resentment at "double allegiances" and exclusionary practices. The defamations and boycotts (in which academic institutions participated) likewise sound familiar to the contemporary reader, who will be reminded also of present-day conspiracy theories, and we see through the perspective of Esme's mother how boycotts lead to violence and deportation.

Mysteriously thrown together, Kevern and Ailinn are perhaps the last of their unnamable and unnamed ethnic group, and they are expected to toe the line on not talking about "WHAT HAPPENED IF IT HAPPENED." We cannot help thinking of Jews in postmodern Britain who are expected to deny there was Holocaust denial as well as to agree that anti-Zionism could not possibly be anti-Semitism or that anyone saying it *was*, was playing the anti-Semitic card in a conspiracy to shut down debate. Sociologist David Hirsh has labeled that *ad hominem* argument the "Livingstone formulation," after the Mayor of London, who used it against anyone protesting his anti-Semitic remarks.²⁵ In Jacobson's novel, "WHAT HAPPENED IF IT HAPPENED" is said to have been a self-defense against a global threat of intolerable proportions, just as in the early twenty-first-century Jews were held guilty by association with Israel and criticized for unfounded accusations of anti-Semitism when they complained about conspiracy theories.

The Aryan first names (Gaelic, Celtic, Cornish, Welsh) echo the invisibility of assimilated contemporary Jews, while ironically the adoption of Ashkenazi names obscures ethnic origins. Everyone, in fact, has been dispersed; where one is from is an unanswerable question, so that personal identities are

vague and vacant. The village of Reuben Port, in a thinly disguised Cornwall, was originally called Ludgvonnok, which gives Jacobson the opportunity for an elaborate intertext based on a letter Wagner wrote to his lover Mathilde Wesendonck praising the local people and landscape as a racial paradise free of Jews. Inspector Gutkind and the local wag Droplik are secret admirers of Wagner, and while Gutkind does not agree that the *Gotterdammerung* has already happened, Droplik insists that they lived in a post-apocalypse. England's anti-Semitic history has also been sanitized. On holiday from the prying eyes of their fellow villagers, Ailinn and Kevern discover that the relics of Little Sir Hugh of Lincoln have been treated to routine erasure of the past—there is simply a blank space in the inscription recording who (allegedly) killed the boy martyr in the blood libel of 1255.

This is the unredeemable present that offers no hope for passionate love or for redeeming heroes. Ailinn and Kevern do not trust love, reflecting Jacobson's misogynist theme in his novels of embittered or frustrated couples, but also because in this dystopia (which consciously recalls *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and a kind of inverted *Brave New World*) there is no passion. Not because it is banned (there are no written laws against it), but because it simply has gone out of fashion, like jazz (also double-barred, as are "Jesus," "joke," "judgment," and "jest"). In a mordant summary of the pop culture of his own day, Jacobson describes the mediocre superficiality of a society that represses its past, that suppresses feelings in life and in art—in fact, mediocrity is overseen by a government office called Ofnow, a parody of the government watchdogs that oversee education and public broadcasting in Britain today. Depression seems infectious and suspicion lurks everywhere. Moroseness and dispossession are the dominant moods in the Necropolis, the run-down capital deserted by tourists except for a few wealthy sheikhs caught between the "spring" in their own country and the English winter (another indication, if one was needed, that this is a parable of contemporary Britain).

This is a dismal vision of a post-apocalypse where nothing is like anything else and there is no future.²⁶ The postmodern city is seen not in the gory blood and shining technology of a science-fiction fantasy, but seen dimly as if through scratched Perspex:

For all the variegations of hue, it had no outlines. People lured into one another. [...] And yet they had passed three cinemas and two theatres on the drive in, all advertising romantic musicals. Love—that was the universal subject. Love to play guitars to. Love to dance to. Love to sing about.²⁷

This is the kind of love that keeps people satisfied, quiet, and complacent. This is the dreary end of multiculturalism after the violence that tore the city apart. In this historical time warp, nobody can remember what happened or wants to. There are no Cohens left in Cohentown and the disused houses make Keaven wonder if his family ever lived there, though he sees

in his mind the deportees in the trains heading east. He cannot know where his family came from or what happened to them; he can only instinctively hear the shattering of glass and the screams of raped women. He dimly remembers his parents' evasive, vague answers explaining why they had to move. Memory emerges only in bits and pieces, like the plot in Jacobson's novel, unwillingly and tainted by mistrust of the truth. The prose itself is wordy and self-consciously morbid as the protagonists cover up their lack of self, their cultural irrelevance, their emotional impotence, and their need to block out what needs to be said. Kevern, moreover, is under suspicion (and is being investigated, even if he is not actually a suspect) in connection with a grisly murder of a married local woman Lowenna Morgenstern, a woman he once kissed. The guilt and paranoia prey on his mind until he commits suicide.

In the letters dating from the 2010s (presumably shortly after the date of publication of the novel) which Esme Nussbaum shows to Aileen, Aileen's grandmother Rebecca scoffed at the warnings of her parents that what happened in Europe could happen here in England; she converted to Christianity, believing in the missionary argument that Jews needed to complete their spiritual identity by accepting Jesus. That delusion of safety in England proves false in Jacobson's allegory of the frog that lets itself be boiled to death because it feels so comfortable, in effect a grim prognosis of disaster facing contemporary assimilated Jews.

Jacobson is not alone in thinking it could happen in England. Julia Pascal's play *Theresa* (2000) dramatizes the forgotten collaboration of British officials and the civilian population with the deportation of Jewish refugees on the occupied island of Guernsey (broadcast on BBC radio, but banned by the local authorities).²⁸ Moreover, a quiet "under the pavement" anti-Semitism was evident in the support for Mosley's fascists in the 1930s but also after the defeat of Hitler in World War Two. Yet, this is not just about the certainty of another Holocaust, of more pogroms. It is a disturbing account of what it feels like to live after Auschwitz without being able to speak of what one no longer has a memory. This is precisely the amnesia of assimilated Jews in an indifferent or unsympathetic society, who are aware that their existence is precarious but do not fully understand why.

There is in fact a general and voluntary amnesia in Jacobson's novel: Esme's investigative report on WHAT HAPPENED IF IT HAPPENED IS, predictably, repressed and she is mysteriously run down by a motorbike. The victims are blamed for what was done to them, though any wrongdoing is denied. This cycle of denial and blame echoes an essay Jacobson published in *Kindle* in 2013, "Will We Ever Be Forgiven for the Holocaust?" Jacobson answers this question with a resounding "no," reasoning, along with Tacitus, that it is human nature never to forgive the man one has hurt:

Holocaust denial was a prototype exercise in this. Once the Holocaust could be shown not to have happened — a crime that never was — then

no one could be accused of not forgiving Jews for it. At a stroke, the victim became the perpetrator, and Jews could go on being accused, as before, of the added crime of fabrication.²⁹

In $\bar{\text{F}}$, as in Jacobson's fictional adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* in his novel *Shylock is My Name*, we are to believe that anti-Semitism and the Holocaust were caused by the need for there to be Jews to hate.

Similarly, in the novel, Jacobson imagines the need to reinvent the Jews in order for society to have an Other to hate. This is why Esme needs Kevern and Ailinn and fosters their relationship, in a plan for them to have a child in a renovation of the Jewish nation which would restore them as objects of antagonism, as needed opposites. That would reinstitute the collective identity of the nation, which defines itself as not being *them*. There is an unstated pessimism in Esme's analysis that in annihilating irreplaceable aliens something essential to social order has been lost, an essential Other who needs to be reinstated, not for the sake of repairing what happened but in order to restore the social balance (this was also Orwell's understanding of hatred in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that united the nation and kept the ruling oligarchy in power). Kevern decides to opt out of Esme's scheme and jumps to his death from a cliff at the end of the novel because he wants to determine his own fate, to be himself and not have his identity determined by others in a relentless cycle of love and hate. In my reading of this novel as a parable of inherited disassociation from the Jewish people, it offers little hope for the future of assimilated Jews whose ethnic origin is the unspoken or unmentionable J-word. Their ethnicity is present only in a pervasive sense of something instinctively feared but forgotten, because no knowledge or memory was handed down, only evasive silence. The abdication of parenthood is Kevern's way of refusing to hand on to his child the fate bestowed by the J-word, just as in Imre Kertész's *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (1990; *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, 1997) the narrator's marriage breaks down under the weight of his self-destructive melancholy because he cannot stand the thought of his existence as something limited by the potentiality of a future child. He did not want to inflict on another generation what he experienced at Auschwitz. To refuse the fate of the persecuted Jew (as in Kertész's fictional memoir *Sorstalanság* [*Fateless*, 1975]) is paradoxically to find freedom in suicide.

The Six-Day War Will Not Take Place: Alternate Jewish Histories

A number of Hebrew and English novels have imagined the unimaginable: the final catastrophe that would destroy Israel, repeat the blood libel, or reenact Babii Yar. Decades before Jacobson's novel, Clive Sinclair's *Blood Libels* imagined a threat to Jews in England, but also dramatized the love-hate relationship of the diaspora and Israel in a fantasy of a right-wing putsch led by a ruthless politician based on Ariel Sharon. The assumption, shared with Amos

Kennan's dystopian novel *Haderekh le'eyn kharod* (1984; *The Road to Ein Harod*, 1986) and Englander's *Dinner at the Center of the Earth*, is that Israeli army chiefs are all megalomaniac and paranoiac, bent on military adventures that will bring the nation to disaster. In Sinclair's novel, the narrator's adulterous relationship with the wife of a Peace Now activist, Hannah Ben Tur, who has been diagnosed with cancer, provides the somatic trope of Israel's sick body and implies an adulterous betrayal of the diaspora Jew's country, but also suggests that the cells of Israel are dying after the first Lebanese war (a trope that Castel-Bloom also uses in *Dolly City*, as we saw in Chapter 3). After Jake voyeuristically watches Hannah masturbating at the window with a letter he wrote (in effect, giving an intimate review of the writings of a diaspora Jew), she asks Jake to perform anal intercourse in order to inject life into the waste matter and dead cells in her sick body. This reads like an elaboration of the land/body trope in Sinclair's short story "The Promised Land" (in *Hearts of Gold*, 1979), where the narrator has sex with an Israeli woman (also called Hannah) when her fiancé is away on army reserve duty. In contrast to John Donne's explorations of his mistress's new world, his exploration of her land of promise is a penetration of a promised land from which he is excluded as a diaspora Jew, who is an interloper and a *shlemiel*, with whom Hannah has no wish to have children. Jake Silkstone in *Blood Libels* is born the same year as the State of Israel, so that he is in a sense the child of the nation, like Saleem in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, but this time the doubt cast on Jake's origins undermines his biological affinity with the Jewish people as well as questioning the somatic symptoms of the writer's national neurosis expressed in Sinclair's "dermagraphia" in his novel *Bibliosexuality* (1973), a neurosis unique to a Jewish writer.³⁰

Not all Jewish writers share the psychosomatic symptoms of Sinclair's Portnoy-like narrator, who suffers from Kafka's dis-ease with his Jewish self, yet Israel remains an abstract possibility rather than a real space, and it could be that this neurosis projects anxieties and fears about the privileged but precarious situation of Jews in exile. Sinclair's book of essays *Diaspora Blues: A View of Israel* (1987) sums up his diaspora identity that is essential to both his sense of exile and his heritage of persecution, which explains why the post-Holocaust Jewish writer is unable to put down roots in any ancestral homeland. Disappointed by the emergence of a religious right-wing nationalist movement and citing the confessional statements of selected Israeli combatants in the Six Day War, *Sikhat lokhamim* (1967; *The Seventh Day*, 1971), Sinclair accounts for what he sees as the psychological and moral damage done by Israel's victory in the Six Day War and makes clear whose side he, like many left-wing Jews, takes in the standoff between Gush Emunim and Peace Now. The peace camp seemed at the time to offer hope for an end to violent conflict and to offer a just solution of the refugee problem. The beacon of Yavneh beckoned with the promise of peace in our time, and in Jewish historiography and intellectual discourse the self-sacrificing heroism of Masada drew ambivalence or fell into disgrace.

This moral unease is shared by many in Israel's intellectual elite, among them the Israeli novelist Nava Semel (1954–2017), who was one of the first to give children of Holocaust survivors a literary voice in her short story collection *Kov'a zkhukhit* (*Glass Hat*, 1985). The Hebrew title of her alternate history fiction, *I-Srael* (2005; *Isra Isle*, 2016), plays on the double meaning of “island” and the negative “not,” hinting at the novel's themes of the Jewish nation's isolation and the subversion of the biblical etymology of Israel as a people locked in struggle with God. The novel starts with the mysterious disappearance of an Israeli, Liam Emmanuel, whose name and birthdate make him a synecdoche for the State of Israel and whose family name suggests a prophetic role. A representative model citizen, war veteran, political activist, and university student, he represents the neuroses of the nation and the wish fulfillment of an alternative reality, a Jewish space from which Liam Emmanuel escapes the pressures of living under constant threat of missile attacks, the traumatic collective memories of the Holocaust, and responsibilities to a son who became religious on a trip to India. The dream of an alternate Promised Land where one could be a free Jew, free of the Holocaust and free of Israel rehearses a familiar story of falling out of love with Israel but without losing desire for Zion.³¹

The alternate Promised Land really does exist. It is called Ararat in upper New York State and it was the visionary scheme of Mordecai Manuel Noah, a Sephardi Jew prominent in the New York Jewish community and an American diplomat. In 1825, Noah bought land on Grand Island on the Niagara River as a refuge for Jews around the world. It was to be called Ararat after the biblical resting place of Noah's ark, appropriately for its founder's family name. The island on the river is presented in Semel's novel as a sanctuary for passion, safe from death. It is (as the epigraph from Cavafy hints) the Ithaca of Odysseus's homecoming, a homecoming that proves in the novels to be discussed in this chapter ironic and anti-climactic for the Wandering Jew, who is more preoccupied with his adventures *en route* than what he can achieve on returning home.

The odyssey in Semel's alternate history is itself more of an escape than a journey of discovery. After Liam Emmanuel extricates his ancestor Mordecai Manuel Noah's will bequeathing the legacy of Ararat to him, he boards a flight for America instead of sitting in the obligatory mourning rite of *shiva* for his dead father. The legacy he holds in his hands is the title deeds to Ararat, the new Zion on Grand Island. In claiming his heritage of Ararat, Liam turns his back on Israel and opts for an ecumenical vision with a political agenda of solidarity with indigenous rights. Mordecai Noah was a fervent believer in the legend (familiar from Enlightenment claims for Christianity as a natural religion) that Native Americans were descended from the lost tribes of Israel.³² This is an idea that Ben Katchor's graphic novel *The Jew of New York* (1998) picks up in its representation of Noah's Ararat project as affiliating American Jews with Native Americans, but also, as Sarah Casteel comments, unsettling their idea of belonging and placing their immigrant

identities in tension with concepts of indigeneity and common ancestry.³³ So, it is no surprise that in Semel's novel, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) inspector Simon T. Lenox, who is detailed to track Liam down, is of Native American descent. Following clues provided by the Israeli embassy in Washington D.C., which is pressuring the US government to locate the missing Israeli, Lenox heads for Niagara Falls. The date is September 2001, a few days before the collapse of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, where Lenox is assigned an office by the American secret services. Lenox suspects Liam Emmanuel intends to follow so many before him and stage a stunt of endurance or commit suicide at the Niagara Falls.³⁴ To further complicate the Jew-Red Indian link, Lenox has sex with a Jewish colleague who inexplicably has a Native American middle name, Jackie Winona Brendal. His own middle name is revealed to be Teibele, a woman's Yiddish name, for which we receive an explanation in a flashback set in September 1825, where it is revealed that the Indian squaw who rowed the "Jewish chief" Mordecai Noah over to the island, Little Dove, bore him a child who later gave it to the barren Lady Lenox, who, in turn, afterwards perpetuated her name in the Yiddish Taibele (Little Dove). This sexual tryst, in another example of the entanglement of sex and politics, brings together the disparate Jewish and Native American traditions, though it is surely stretching our credulity to suppose the wealthy American Lenox family or the proud Sephardi Mordecai Noah would have known Yiddish. However, hybridity in postcolonial discourse underlines the idea that there are no pure original or indigenous identities.

Like Mel Brooks in his parodic movie *Blazing Saddles* (1974), the fantasy of the happy union of Native American and Jew occurs to Lenox as an absurd hybrid "Jewindian" (*indihudi*), echoing a rich tradition in American Yiddish popular culture of a common cause of victims of persecution and massacre.³⁵ Semel proposes a further analogy in the novel between the Palestinian Arabs and Native Americans as dispossessed peoples, and suggests in an interview with Adam Rovner that it is a lesson that Israelis need to learn in compassion. In this identification of Native Americans/Palestinian Arabs, Semel offers a fable of Israeli rather than American Jewish history. To teach this lesson, "Little Dove" asks Noah to recognize that he did not arrive in an empty land and directs him to open his eyes to the ghosts of the island, to respect their ancient heritage.³⁶

What Native Americans and Jews have in common makes Lenox think of himself as a matchmaker of the dead bringing together Liam Emmanuel's father, who died of cancer, and Lenox's grandmother, who died of the same disease in a Jewish Old Age Home. However, Lenox's reading of the story of Noah's Ark in the Bible makes him skeptical in view of his own Native American traditions, while he is bewildered by the idea embedded in the Ararat project (and, as the narrator makes explicit, also in Zionism) that land could be considered someone's property. Through his eyes, Grand Island, site of tribal squabble and massacre as well as the colonizers' bloody feuds

and the expulsion of homeless squatters, is an unlikely Jewish space—Lenox fails to understand how Jews could possibly survive there on hunting and fishing. He doubts Mordecai Noah ever set foot on the island and, besides, from an indigenous viewpoint (which recognizes only communal ownership of land), wasn't implanting Jews on land sold to the Whites by a Seneca chief a bit like forcing the Jews ("alien transplants") on the indigenous populations of the Middle East? In presenting this dubious rhetoric, Semel takes the post-Zionist position that the claim to territorial sovereignty is invented and that Jews ought to detach themselves from what she repeatedly calls in the novel the "pastpresent" in order to move into the "presentfuture." Liam Emmanuel, for his part, explains that Israel is the original "yearned-for land" (*mkhoz-khefetz*), but he corrupts the biblical verse in Genesis commanding Abraham to go from his home, his father's house, and his country to "the land that you could have had."³⁷ He distorts the biblical verse in order to give the impression of a crippling nostalgia for what could have been an ideal homeland from which he has fled. In other words, the promised land is only worth yearning for when it is promised but not actually settled, when (as we will see again in Chapter 6) desire for Land is a dream of what might have been.

Semel is apparently casting doubt on the value of the inheritance found in the *boydem* (the attic or storeroom) as well as its psychological burden, which results in compulsive repetition in succeeding generations and which anti-Zionist critics of Israel see as the cause of political and psychological paralysis. This is doubtlessly why the cornerstone of Ararat which Mordecai Noah laid on the 50th anniversary of American independence seems to Liam Emmanuel a theatrical gesture of inventing a nation. He thinks of his legacy as symbolic of the "failure" of the state of Israel: precisely because of Israel's economic prosperity and military prowess, it failed to live up to a utopian dream that was no more than a dream. In Liam Emmanuel's blasphemous parody, the ancient pious prayer to remember Jerusalem (Psalm 137) could just as well be replaced by Tel Aviv, or Ararat, or any lost homeland for which the two new friends weep as they sit by the waters of the Niagara before they part.³⁸ Liam Emmanuel remains on Grand Island to throw away his life savings in the casino, while Lenox returns "home" (a word in which he struggles to find meaning), only to disappear in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. In a rather contrived parallelism, the Israeli disappears from history and the Native American is swallowed up by history. Ararat exists as an imaginary homeland, a place that is in Hebrew *makom*, another name of God, as Liam Emmanuel explains to Lenox, which is (as I noted in the introduction) a metaphysical term for the transcendental Divine Presence.³⁹ The Jewish homeland thus only exists in the mind as a lost ideal.

In sharing a preoccupation in Israeli fiction with existential anxieties and national war-weariness, Semel's post-apocalyptic scenario superimposes a post-Zionist perspective on the vision of Ararat, deconstructing it as a

usurpation of indigenous rights, imagined from a shamanist native American viewpoint informed by postcolonial discourses and new age spiritualism. In the mind of Little Dove, a slave girl in the Lenox household, who rows the “Jewish chief” to the island which he purchased, there are doubts about the Jews’ claim to a homeland (*moledet*):

A fictitious homeland. A longed-for land that never was.

If land is not property, then anywhere may be considered a homeland. [...] The Jew is free to settle in whichever land he desires. Why then does he insist on drawing borders for himself, when he has already managed to obtain a measure of power for himself that I will never achieve?⁴⁰

In this politicized rhetoric, the Jews cannot claim to draw borders on the basis of power and also claim legal rights that dispossess those without power. Little Dove can only understand that the land the Jews lost and are always seeking is “Isra Isle,” the heritage of the man called “Struggles with God,” the name (*Yisrael*) which the angel gave to Jacob in the Bible—a land of strife, not tranquility, the land she calls Provoking the Spirit (*mitgareh barukah*).⁴¹ Far better, reasons Little Dove, for the Jews to continue wandering and not try to rescind the divine edict by resettling their homeland. For Little Dove, the future is in the present: she can let go and move on; why can’t the Jews? Why are they stuck in the “presentpast”? The answer, she learns, is Mordecai Manuel Noah’s vision of the ingathering of the transients, six million souls who would otherwise be herded into gas chambers. This dreadful vision is an alternate history to the Holocaust and shows how preempting Zionism could have saved the Jews, circumventing the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel, the “map-stain” that obliterates traces of native trackers.⁴²

Isra Isle closes with a fantasy of the alternate future, set in the year 2025, after Israel has been destroyed and replaced by a “Grand Palestine.” Ararat remains the only refuge of the Jews and it is a dazzling success story. It has absorbed the six million Jews who would otherwise have perished in the Holocaust, and it now boasts a homegrown candidate for the Presidency of the United States, Emmanuelle Winona Noah, a descendant of Mordecai Manuel Noah, whose vision is to spread observance of the seven Noahite laws in order to inaugurate an era of world peace. The premise of this fantasy is that a territorial refuge of the Jews would put an end to racism and anti-Semitism, an alternative to the Zionist solution of the Jewish Question. The Twin Towers still stand in New York, and nobody remembers that Herzl imagined his Altneuland as a utopia based on economic prosperity. Hebrew is extinct, and the fusion of Native American and Jewish beliefs and legends does not leave room for Judaism.

Nevertheless, this alternate Zion too is charged with usurping indigenous rights, and the residents of Isra Isle, formerly Grand Island or Ararat, inhabit the island solely by right of their claim to have been persecuted.

Clearly, sovereignty irked Semel with the specter and the moral risks of abusing power. Moreover, the concept of “home,” whether it is a marital nest or a national homeland, is still bugged by the abolition of nostalgia. There can be a longing for home, for a “thereplace,” but only after one leaves home and slams the door. Otherwise, for Semel, home and homeland become a voluntary prison:

Home is the place you leave with a slam of the door and swear you’ll never go back to. [...] Isra Islers are prisoners who willingly enter lockdown, allowing the watery gates to slam behind them for the rest of their lives.⁴³

The success story of Israel in real life appears in this view to be its downfall, since the power which the Jews wield over others could bring down the wrath of the nations for the injustice to which it inevitably leads. Moreover, a national homeland requires borders, whereas the black homosexual narrator of the final counter-history section believes love could only thrive in a transnational world where there are no boundaries.

Semel was not alone in conscripting “Ararat” for a political agenda. The Toronto-based artist Melissa Schiff has constructed the never-realized project of Ararat as a virtual reality using smartphone applications to superimpose images onto the actual landscape of Grand Island which the viewer tours. In the words of the artist’s husband and the project’s historical researcher, Louis Kaplan:

Utilizing digital media technologies such as augmented reality (AR), as well as the construction of an interactive virtual world, this project gives Noah’s Ararat the chance to become the Jewish homeland that its founder had envisioned but never realized. [...] *Mapping Ararat* combines historical research, para-historical speculation, new digital technologies, and artistic creation to image and imagine Mordecai Noah’s vision in and for the twenty-first century.⁴⁴

The project thus intervenes in contemporary constructions of Jewish spaces with a virtual reality of a promised land that never was. It also brings to life the ghosts of the past, as in much virtual tourism in eastern Europe, blending historical facts and artifacts with imagination and fiction to create a Derridean trace of absence in the present.⁴⁵ Schiff is undermining the link between territoriality and identity and does not take it for granted that Israel is the only homeland of the Jews. As Laurence Roth indicates, *Mapping Ararat* joins other digital networking and interactive sites that map Jewish spaces and creatively shape cultural knowledge.⁴⁶ Yet we may well ask how “Jewish” Ararat is merely on the basis of its memorials and synagogue, but also a “Kosher Casino and Spa” and a multiscreen cinema; indeed, it is not clear how it would accommodate aboriginal claims in a counter-narrative.

The reinvention of Ararat also questions the chosen-ness of the Jewish people, a debate that has from time to time bubbled to the surface from Arthur Koestler's *The Thirteenth Tribe* to Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Jewish People* and his *The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland*, which attempted to undermine the consensus of the unity and common identity of the Jewish people based on their historic claim to an ancestral homeland. Sand's *Twilight of History* (2017) seemed to put the final touch to demolishing all myths of origins and disconnected completely Israel from Judaism.⁴⁷

Moreover, moral doubts and dismay at the rise of the right in Israel from 1977 brought writers to turn in their imagination to the paths not taken. When Robert Frost told "with a sigh" how he took the road "less traveled by," it was with the knowledge there was no way back; the authors of the alternate histories I am discussing are going back to the fork in the paths before other directions were abandoned or blocked. The paths not taken, as Adam Rovner has shown in a study of forgotten "Promised Lands" or alternate Zions, are all the more topical, now that Zionism has succeeded in establishing a state, gathered the exiles, and gained the upper hand over its opponents.⁴⁸

Northern Exposure

In the frontispiece of the Hebrew edition of *Isra Isle* appears a photograph of the original foundation stone of Ararat, anchoring in history Semel's fantasy of a world in which the Jews were not traumatized by the Holocaust or war, a world in which, as in a forked Borgesian garden, there were different possible outcomes that played out the contingency of "what if?" against the determinism of what we know happened.⁴⁹ It would have been the perfect escape from history, and this is what Michael Chabon imagines in his counter-factual detective novel written in the style of Raymond Chandler, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. This is a world in which the Jews were miraculously spared their extermination in the Holocaust and transplanted to Alaska, much as Mordecai Noah previously envisaged his Ararat as a refuge for the Jews. Chabon has acknowledged "that the memory of Noah crossed my mind when I was conceiving of the place I would create, perhaps most in the sense that I was going to be the Mordecai Noah of my own Ararat."⁵⁰ Yet both Semel and Chabon suggest that a territorial solution isolates the Jews, dividing them from humanity, and lessens their chances of survival.

This is why Israel must be destroyed in Chabon's imagination, a necessary destruction which could well have happened if the War of Independence had been lost against five powerful Arab armies who vowed to throw the Jews into the sea. The second Holocaust of 600,000 Jews in the short-lived State of Israel is dismissed in a paragraph, and there is no mention whatsoever of the 800,000 Jews displaced from their homes in Arab countries (Sephardim seem not to exist in Chabon's imagination). The bogey is again

power, specifically Jewish power, and religious Jews are feared most of all. In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the religious “black-hatters” have power and they thirst for revenge. Chabon’s fantasy of a plot to attack the Temple Mount in order to restore Palestine to the Jews realizes left-wing fears of Jewish fanatic extremism fueled by popular equations of religion with violent fanaticism, familiar from Robert Stone’s popular thriller *Damascus Gate*.⁵¹

No more than (!) two million Jews died in the Holocaust, according to Chabon’s revision of history. There was no rescue (as there is in Semel’s alternate history), and as in historical reality, the Americans kept the gates of immigration closed to Jews. In 1940 (when France fell and hundreds of thousands of Jews were in danger), US Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes proposed that the government support a scheme to settle refugees in Alaska and profitably exploit local resources; this led to the King-Havener bill, which was defeated in committee as a result of anti-immigrant pressure and lack of support from President Roosevelt. The idea was supported by the Freeland League (a Jewish colonization movement) but was abandoned. Chabon imagines what would have happened if the bill had been pushed through Congress to create in Alaska, around the city of Sitka, an interim refuge for Jewish survivors.⁵² The arrangement is temporary and expires at the opening of the novel, when Reversion is about to return the area to the jurisdiction of the state of Alaska, and the Jews will have to leave. As in Philip Roth’s *The Plot against America*, the Jews are not wanted elsewhere, even if they developed a healthy appetite for pork and could curse and swear like any American. “These are,” in a phrase repeated throughout Chabon’s novel, “strange times to be a Jew.”⁵³ That refers to Reversion, but also serves as a trope for the precarious condition of Jewish history, as they say in Yiddish, “mir leben in freylekhn tseytn” (literally, “we live in jolly times”), that is to say, in times of trouble for Jews. And when were the Jews not in trouble? Chabon grinds his axe against Zionism on this vision of a homeless people in a calamitous world, who can lay claim to no territory of their own. Chabon writes in the context of what he sees as the failure of post-Holocaust Jews to secure a safe haven, let alone a homeland, yet in the end he is more focused on the personal failure of sex and love.⁵⁴

Considered as a heterotopia, Chabon’s imaginary Sitka (unlike the real city in Alaska, which has a minuscule Jewish population) is a strange place.⁵⁵ Yiddish is spoken, although we do not hear it (apart from some slang Chabon has picked up from the underworld or invented). There are Yiddish newspapers and streets are named for famous secular Yiddish-speaking Jews. Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto who hoped for an internationalist utopia, is remembered in the name of the seedy flophouse that goes by the name of a hotel, where Landsman has a room. Yes, there are *mezuzot* on the doorposts and kosher stores, one of which replaces a casino closed down under the Traditional Values law which forced religious laws on the population. But there is little that is “Jewish” behind this façade, or no more than

there once was in the nominally Jewish and nominally autonomous region of Birobidzhan in Stalin's Russia. Judaism is crudely and cruelly lampooned, leaving nothing but scorn for the "black hatters" who conform to anti-Semitic stereotypes of a sinister and dangerous secret sect. In fact, they are (rather incredibly) allied with evangelical Christians in a plot to wreak "Old Testament" vengeance and bring the messiah (as in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, we find ourselves in an invented fundamentalist America). Such reduction of all religion to fundamentalism and extremism is not uncommon in the rhetoric of post-Zionism, and although American evangelicals have embraced Israel as part of their eschatological beliefs, there is a world of difference between their messianism and that of Hasidism.

Chabon builds the murder plot on the false assumption that Hasidic sects work like a mafia and uses every opportunity to unleash an atheist attack on the rites of the Jewish religion as meaningless and primitive. Menachem Mendl Shpilman, the renegade son of the powerful Hasidic leader behind the wicked fundamentalist conspiracy, is found murdered in his hotel room, where he has been hiding out under the name Emmanuel Lasker. He has been using the leather straps of *tefillin* as a tourniquet. Commenting on this unusual method of tying up for a heroin shot, the narrator comments:

Each morning the pious Jew twines one of these doodads along his left arm, ties another on his forehead, and prays for understanding of the kind of God Who obliges somebody to do something like that every damn day of his life.⁵⁶

Here, the *tourniquet-tefillin* represent the threatening tight grip of repression, an association commonly evoked by critics of Judaism; Epstein repeats it in Nicole Krauss's *Forest Dark*. Before he shoots himself, old man Hertz Shemets calls it S/M gear.

It has been said that Landsman's cynicism is a defense mechanism for the emptiness within him, for his lack of faith in the illusions which keep others going.⁵⁷ Yet, there is no mistaking the venom in the narrator's presentation of Zionism as fundamentalist messianism. Landsman bumps into a street bum symbolically called Elijah, a filthy but enigmatic old man, who is "always pimping for Messiah," and who drags around with him the heavy burden of the messianic delusion that weighs down the Jewish people. The narrator comments with characteristically sardonic cynicism on the hopeless irrelevance of Zionism:

The Holy Land has never seemed more remote or unattainable than it does to a Jew of Sitka. It is on the far side of the planet, a stretched place ruled by men united in their resolve to keep out all but a worn fistful of small-change Jews. For half a century, Arab strongmen and Muslim partisans, Persians and Egyptians, socialists and nationalists and monarchists, pan-Arabists and pan-Islamists, traditionalists and the Party

of Ali, have all sunk their teeth into Eretz Yisroel and worried it down to bone and gristle. Jerusalem is a city of blood and slogans painted on the wall, severed heads on telephone poles.⁵⁸

Jerusalem, Landsman thinks, is a lunatic asylum for religious fanatics like Buchbinder who is going there to await the Messiah and is mixed up with the entirely fictional Moriah conspiracy to take over the Temple Mount. In fact, Landsman rejects any religious definition of his Jewishness and particularly the covenantal narrative:

All at once he feels weary of ganef's and prophets, guns and sacrifices and the infinite gangster weight of God. He's tired of hearing about the promised land and the inevitable bloodshed required for its redemption. "I don't care what is written. I don't care what supposedly got promised to some sandal-wearing idiot whose claim to fame is that he was ready to cut his own son's throat for the sake of a hare-brained idea. I don't care about red heifers and patriarchs and locusts. A bunch of old bones in the sand. My homeland is in my hat. It's in my ex-wife's tote bag."⁵⁹

This just about sums up a crude anti-Zionist tirade that rejects historical claims to territory that inevitably lead to violence and can satisfy only a sacrificial need for bloodshed. Chabon's hostility toward Israel doubtlessly stems from a fear, common to many Jews on the left, that it somehow endangers the Jews on whom the wrath of the nations will descend and that it has not saved them from danger or stigmatization; worse, it imposes on their secular identities a messianic narrative in which they do not believe.⁶⁰

Musing on having missed his chance at "something like redemption" in not saving Mendel Shpilman, the putative *tsaddik hador* (leader of the generation), a hidden savior, from being murdered, the ironically named Landsman admits that "there is no Messiah of Sitka. Landsman has no home, no future"—indeed, he has "no fate but Bina," his estranged wife, who is now his boss and who disobeys orders in letting Landsman pursue this murder case.⁶¹ The Promised Land to which he and she looked forward under the wedding canopy goes no further than "the dog-eared corners of their cards of membership in an international fraternity whose members carry their patrimony in a tote bag, their world on the tip of the tongue."⁶² These are the invisible borders of Chabon's internationalist, extraterritorial, diaspora homeland of the mind.

As Rachel Rubinstein points out,⁶³ like Nava Semel, Chabon cites the analogy of the dispossession of the Native Americans and the Palestinian Arabs, but in Chabon's case the parallel between immigrant Jews and indigenous Native Americans is far more complex and ambivalent. The Jews fraternize with the indigenous population and one Tlingit policeman speaks fluent Yiddish. Hertz Shemetz is drawn to Tlingit customs but for his own nefarious purposes, and he fathers the burly half-Tlaglit Berko Shemetz who

has a “four corner” (*arba-kanfos* or ritual undergarment) and sports a “cut penis,” yet is deeply conflicted, performing the *indianer* among Jews and a Jewface among Indians.⁶⁴ Relations are tense and deteriorate into violence, as in the “synagogue riots” over disputed land (which Sarah Casteel believes to be a reference to the Crown Heights riot of 1991, suggesting a similar underlying ethnic hostility toward Jews among American Blacks).⁶⁵ I would see indigeneity here, in contrast to Semel’s novel not as an idealized fusion of Jewish and Native American outsidersness, but as an indicator of the Jews’ marginality in a world where there is no place for them, yet also as an indictment of their complicity in the exploitation of others, for whom they have a responsibility (as we see in a 2017 collection edited by Chabon and his wife Ayelet Waldman, *Kingdom of Olives and Ash: Writers Confront the Occupation*).

There is little idealism in Chabon’s version of the “Jewindian.” Hertz Shemetz’s infiltration into Tlingit territory is actually an American intelligence operation to root out “Reds” among Jews and the (Red) Indians, but he is also involved in a clandestine Jewish independence movement. The Jews, we are to understand, are not satisfied with the clemency of the Gentiles but their teeming millions swarm outside the territory allotted to them and threaten the peace of the region with their nationalistic, territorialist ambitions. These are the anxieties of diaspora Jews, fearful for their own security in White America, but they echo mainstream contemporary discourses of global migration and indigenous rights. The ironic anthem of the Sitka Jews, “Nokh Amol” (“once again”) runs counter to the partisans’ defiant anthem, Hirsh Glik’s “Zog nit keynmol” (“do not say never”), no doubt because Chabon’s narrator envisions Jewishness as a survivalist creed of toughened individuals who have been hardened by one pogrom after another and who do not look forward to any redemption. Urban legend has it that the *untershtot* in the novel is named for a network of underground passages that would serve (like the Warsaw sewers) as escape tunnels when the Jews would again be forced out. At the funeral of the failed messiah Mendel Shpilman, the Jews ineffectively bewail the coming of Reversion, the loss of a “hope of a hope”:

They are like goldfish in a bag, about to be dumped back into the big black lake of Diaspora. But that’s too much to think about. So instead, they lament the loss of a lucky break they never got, a chance that was no chance at all, a king who was never going to come in the first place [...].⁶⁶

If the messiah is meant to be seen as a delusion and the diaspora is an inhospitable black sea where the Jews are always homeless, we are invited to draw the post-Zionist conclusion that, as the Boyarins put it in their manifesto for an extraterritorial Jewishness, the “lesson of diaspora is that people and lands are not naturally and organically connected.”⁶⁷

At the same time, in a post-9/11 apocalypse, the story of “northern exposure” sounds raw and fatalistic, not at all an adventure of endurance and survival in which a neurotic New York Jew could prove his worth as a true American and relate to a national narrative of frontier settlement.⁶⁸ This is not the new muscular Jew of the Zionist revival in the Land of Israel, but a desperate, burned-out male who might have escaped from a Hemingway novel and who uses his brains to beat opponents in crime and in chess as well as his gun (until it is taken away from him).⁶⁹ Chess is a game in which the Jews are players in a Nabokovian Zugzwang, the helpless pieces in someone else’s game of history.⁷⁰ The Jewish past has little value for Landsman, except as a vague nostalgic delusion that things used to be better. A disaffected and solitary alcoholic, Police Inspector Landsman mourns his aborted child and failed marriage. He is in the end evicted from his hotel room, which could never (as the Verbover *rebbetzin* tells him) serve as a home. Landsman is left with only a tattered defunct Yiddish Policemen’s Union Card. The novel ends with fatalistic defeat.

Chabon recreates a “Yiddishland” that is no more believable than Trachimbrod in Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, a similarly irreverent entertainment that satirizes a fake Jewish American celebration of the past but ignores the real legacy of Yiddish in America (like Foer, Chabon has been criticized for distortions and absurdities).⁷¹ The east European Jewish world that vanished in the Holocaust is largely unknown and (outside synagogues and *yeshivot*) unknowable beyond its fictional portrayal. What then can be retrieved as a “usable past?” The answer seems to be very little, if we take seriously Chabon’s mocking 1997 essay “Guidebook to the Land of Ghosts,” a review of the Dover travel guidebook *Say It in Yiddish* (1958) by the leading Yiddish scholars Uriel and Beatrice Weinrich (which helpfully included the word “tourniquet” for wayward Jews in hotel rooms). Chabon tells us he was amazed that a Yiddish phrasebook could be a normal book found on the shelves in a bookstore and failed to understand why anyone would need a Yiddish phrasebook after the Holocaust (he later admitted he did not know who the Weinrichs were).⁷² Chabon wondered whether this could be a means for him to communicate, in an impossible wish fulfillment, with his vanished relatives in some virtual eastern Europe or for that matter in a virtual Yiddish world in Alaska.⁷³ In his essay “Imaginary Homelands,” Chabon returned to the controversy over “Guidebook to the Land of Ghosts” and declared that every American Jew must feel a stranger—like other minorities in America—in a nation that was equally founded on “enslavement and butchery as on ideals of liberty and brotherhood”; once in a while, every American Jew must have a vertiginous feeling of no more being able to take for granted “the continued tolerance of your existence here than you ought to take the prosperity and freedom you enjoy.”⁷⁴ Chabon’s insecurity does not derive from personal experience of persecution or anti-Semitism, nor is he unable to return to his native town, unlike his grandparents’ generation. He nevertheless writes from a place of exile.⁷⁵ Chabon’s essay echoes the

title of Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, which addressed the situation of an Indian writer living in Britain who could only imagine his native Bombay and which made the case for the writer's homeless, exilic condition of transnational migration.⁷⁶ Chabon's imaginary homelands, however, are of another order and category that arise from a rejection of Israel as an alternate home, both as a state born of religious yearning for destroyed Jerusalem and as an ideology based on the nation-state. Only in an imagined *Ashkenaz* or *Yiddishland* could the writer be at home as an author of fantasy and detective novels as well as an American Jew. Perhaps *Say It in Yiddish* could be useful in finding a homeland that is always lost.⁷⁷ Paradoxically, Chabon is remapping the spaces of diasporism by recovering a secular east European Jewish culture in a second- or third-hand transmission mediated through American postmodernism, but for this to happen the extinct Jewish world first must be destroyed.

Necessary Destruction: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am*

The *necessary* destruction of Israel is a foundation of Jonathan Safran Foer's satirical critique of suburban assimilated Jews' post-apocalyptic worldview in *Here I Am* (2016). The novel opens with a rare certainty, the reported destruction of Israel, which in effect realizes the doomsday predictions of Israel's critics who preach that its policies are destructive and harmful because they encourage an endless cycle of violence. Destruction seems all the more certain after the Holocaust. In the absence of belief in rebirth and future growth, all that is left is a preoccupation with loss and mourning. As Foer puts it bluntly in this novel, his central protagonist Jacob is tempted to allow his son to snip the thread that led back to kings and prophets simply because "Judaism as they practiced it was boring as hell and overflowing with hypocrisy."⁷⁸ His father Irv goes further in insisting on his choice to resist conformity to Jewish ritual without being judged for it. The certainty of destruction, however, eliminates any certainty of continuity, including Sam's planned bar mitzvah ceremony that his great-grandfather, the Holocaust survivor Isaac, is looking forward to as the culminating moment of his life. Foer parallels the choices Jacob faces when called to defend Israel with the choices he faces in his broken marriage; in both cases, Jacob fails to act and thus stands for a passive identity that contrasts with his Israeli cousin Tamir, who is stereotypically brash and arrogant. Yet neither of them has a stable family or home; Jacob was brought up on loyalty to American superiority and traces his lineage to Galicia and the Holocaust, not a Jewish homeland.⁷⁹ This, it seems to me, offers an unhopeful prognosis of American Jewry, but also comments on suburban Americans who live in a virtual, hypermediated reality.

The destruction of Israel in an earthquake followed by a regional war half-way through the novel offers yet another dystopian scenario, this time based on a hypermediated reality, no more or less "real" than the Micronesia crisis game Julie and Mark are staging in the hotel, where Jacob imagines them

committing adultery, one of several examples in this novel of international politics being boiled down to sexual relations. National and domestic crises run into each other, and each raises its own issue of loyalty and betrayal. The family's responses to both the Middle East earthquake and to the death of great-grandfather Isaac are characterized, moreover, by divisive infighting and narcissistic bickering about how to adequately respond to death and disaster and how to accommodate them in the bar mitzvah plans, which must proceed because that's what Jews do. Israel, typically misrepresented as militaristic and merciless in its abuse of Jewish power, gets sidelined and becomes almost unmentionable nationally and on the domestic front (the "I-word"). Once more, as during the Nazi genocide of the Jews, the world abandons the Jews, but the focus here is on the effect on a dysfunctional family and its core identity as Jewish Americans.

Disaster tests loyalties but also questions the basis of identities and emotional or marital ties in the absence of an angel or a ram to save the Jews, as when Isaac was saved from sacrifice in the Bible. The last possibility of agency is summed up in a Yiddish phrase of Grandfather Isaac's that the rabbi picks up in his eulogy, "eyn breira iz oykh a breira" ("no choice is also a choice"). This message in the name of one of the last Holocaust survivors is that in life's twin battle, to survive and to live righteously, the generation which no longer lives in a situation of no choice has lost its freedom of choice; only when the Jews are in danger is that moral choice restored. As Lawrence Langer points out in his introduction of the term "choiceless choice" in his reading of Primo Levi and other writers of Holocaust testimony, this existential situation is a product of the extraordinary inhuman conditions of the camps.⁸⁰ Here, however, "choiceless choice" is presented ironically when there is suddenly cause to act and Jacob fails to act.

The imagined final catastrophe of Jewish history questions American Jewish loyalties, but it also shows the dissolution of the notion of home, the essential space that constitutes the Jewish family. The home that Jacob and Julia have built in a comfortable suburb of Washington D.C. is held together by feelings, the feelings with which they rear their five children. These feelings run thin after their son Sam is accused of writing the n-word in an obscene graffiti on his desk at Hebrew school. Julia and Jacob cannot agree whether to defend their son's denial or confront him with the rabbi's demand that he must apologize if he wants to have a bar mitzvah ceremony. Racism cannot be tolerated in the Jewish community, and the n-word is so much more sensitive than just plain obscenities or anti-Semitism, yet bigotry and hypocrisy exist both within the community and within the family. It is in fact impossible to disentangle truth and lies, whether in the children's trivial arguments over servings of snack food or more weighty matters. Julia and Jacob lead their lives in a shallow, superficial, conventional American middle-class consumer culture and educate their son Max to shed his generous altruism for the more normal calculating meanness of late capitalism that prices the value of everything and everyone.

The hypermediation of current events and the family's distance from the real world as well as from each other are accentuated by the technology of cyberspace and virtual worlds, for example in video games. Sam's computer-generated simulacrum of a synagogue exists only to be destroyed, a further level of necessary destruction. It is a place where he can be nowhere. Yet, in virtual reality there are also feelings and there is solitude. Julia's other life exists in her hobby of drawing house designs, but there is only a single bedroom in her dreams; perfection, she thinks, lies in solitude (which is not necessarily the same as loneliness). Jacob too, besides his writing of a script about an alternate family, has his other life in his imagined buying of real estate, yet another form of virtual space which creates an aspired social self-esteem and status.

The dissolution of family and home follows a familiar pattern of post-modern love. As Jacob and Julia age and the children grow taller, they gradually lose the desire to kiss or to share their innermost feelings. The night they once lay naked in a motel room and smoked a joint, sharing secrets and vowing never to withhold anything from each other, becomes a benchmark of the absolute intimacy from which they are growing farther and farther until they approach the end of the childbearing years:

There were things Jacob wanted, and he wanted them from Julia. But the possibility of sharing desires diminished as her need to hear them increased. They loved each other's company, and would always choose it over either aloneness or the company of anyone else, but the more comfort they found together, the more life they shared, the more estranged they became from their inner lives.⁸¹

In short, their lives become so overwhelmed by living life to the full, to being perfect parents, that they lose the ability to love each other and descend in a destructive spiral into mutual estrangement. Julia becomes so sensitive to Jacob's insecurities and jealousies that she hesitates to share with him her private thoughts and secrets, yet she is unable not to respond to his needs.

This is a sad appraisal of postmodern marriage, but it also provides an insight into the human dilemma of sacrificing oneself and one's family. In the Hebrew Bible *hineni*, "here I am," is the word Abraham spoke in response to God's call for him to bind his beloved son Isaac for a sacrifice, a declaration of total dedication and readiness to receive the divine command. It is also the word Abraham spoke to his son in response to Isaac's asking where the sacrificial animal was. In his spiritual guide to personal wholeness and self-fulfillment, *Here I Am* (2011), Californian psychologist Leonard Felder advocates taking up Abraham's response to the divine call as a spiritual tool in times of personal crisis, a self-accounting of where one is in the world and in relation to God.⁸² Foer is not concerned in his novel of the same title with the absolute and pure faith of Abraham, who expressed his unquestioning readiness, his *here-I-am-ness*. He is more interested in the down-to-earth

mundaneness of *I am here*, of being here and questioning who I am here, of asking what can be sacrificed for one's child, for one's marriage. Yet the faithless or atheist "I am here" also expresses existential anxieties about being here in an apparently meaningless universe, as in Camus's reading of the myth of Sisyphus, who mastered his destiny in accepting the humanity of his situation. In his parodic bar mitzvah speech (not the "to be and not to be" speech he actually delivers), Sam finds little meaning in this biblical episode except for the message that Abraham was wholly present for his son and for God, whereas his parents are demonstrably not wholly present for him with any trust or the love he needs.

When Israel faces destruction in Foer's novel, the ram's horn issues the same call as the one recalling the *'aqeda* (the binding of Isaac) at the close of the Day of Atonement, calling every Jew to come home and answer the same call as Abraham. But it takes the destruction of Israel and the destruction of his marriage for Jacob to answer that call and to face the "I" in "I am here." And yet, in the end he does not lay his life on the line and fails to join the Jewish collective in fighting for Israel. In fact, he lies that he was there with those who fought and died for the Jewish people. Unlike the biblical Jacob, he fights neither with God nor man, just as in Joshua Cohen's *Moving Kings* (2017) Uri cannot face the test of Abraham's call to faith in the *'aqeda*, which is, as a mystic rabbi told him, his lifetime destiny as a Jew. In Nicole Krauss's *Great House*, Abraham's test is a game that Dov's father Aaron plays with his son, mocking his weakness and passivity when lost in the Ramon Crater. That is an example of a father denying his son the love that Abraham gave Isaac. Yet, in the postmodern dissolution of self, it is indeed difficult to speak of an "I am here" beyond contingent and fluid situatedness that characterizes the postwar novel's attempt to grapple with the absence of a constituted self in the structure of plot and narrative voice. The call to faith of "Here I Am," which initiated the covenantal bond with God and inaugurated the core narrative of exile and return, has not fared well: "there are no 'miracles' in the fiction of contemporary American Jewish writers," declares Victoria Aarons, "no covenantal fulfillment."⁸³ This is because after the Holocaust God has been on trial, not man, and found wanting or missing. The Bible has been replaced by *Anne Frank's Diary*. When ethnicity does not depend on synagogue affiliation, trials of faith no longer mean much.⁸⁴

The irrelevance of Abraham's call to faith speaks for postmodern skepticism in a post-apocalyptic vision of a world beyond repair, a world in which marital and existential relationships inevitably fall apart. There is a similar reticent or qualified coming to terms with the global disorder and disaster in Foer's 9/11 novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: Oskar never finds out how his father died but at the end salvages his mother's love that brings him back to being a "normal" kid. The key he finds does not open any door to his own happiness or to any resolution of his traumatic loss (not unlike the key to the locked writing desk in Krauss's *Great House*, which turns out

to be empty). In the post-apocalyptic state of the world (as in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*), human relationships float and fragment, marriages dissolve, and love turns out to be unsustainable.

In the shallow, superficial mundane life described in *Here I Am*, marital fidelity has little chance of standing any test let alone a metaphysical leap of faith in God, who seems to have little to offer when all material comforts are supplied in abundance. Saving Israel from destruction is mere background in a plot of marital breakdown punctuated by crude wise-cracks and dirty jokes, trading insults, ironical paradoxes, and double negatives. There appears to be a willful destruction of life-force in the protagonists' sex lives: Jacob's explicit sexting to another woman reads like something out of Philip Roth's *Sabbath Theater*; Julia's masturbation in the bathroom with a stolen doorknob suggests a double symbol of transgression and displacement; Tamir's prodigious masturbation at a computer screen exhibits a stereotypical Israeli masculinity; and the detailed technique of Sam's compulsive masturbation anywhere and everywhere is his way of proving that his parents don't care about him. Self-pleasuring is a way of avoiding the complications and disappointments of relationships, perhaps, but more importantly, it shows the atomization of the family and the lack of any direction of its members. Everything gets sexualized, but most of all the family members obsess about death. Yet they do not believe in heaven or any metaphysical meaning to their lives; more precisely, they believe in no-meaning in a scenario of death, divorce, and destruction.

This is why Jacob, the writer figure in *I Am Here*, is writing a parallel comedy script about his family, which tries to redeem their story but can only give endless explanations in an alternate Bible. Jacob is the only one who feels any belonging to his Israeli cousins, but he despises Tamir for being over-the-top in his arrogant and boastful materialism, while envying him for his masculinity and success. Nevertheless, Tamir makes Jacob feel how trivial are his problems compared with the cataclysmic situation of Israel and Tamir's family. But here too Jacob can be said to be hiding in a psychological bunker. Jacob dreams of an enormous subterranean air-raid shelter as the only place he feels safe when he is in Israel, yet it is a wish fulfillment of a space where he does not need to feel guilty about his marriage or his failures. True to the predominance of virtual over real reality in the novel's depiction of postmodern America, Jacob lives in the shadow of Steven Spielberg's films, particularly *Schindler's List*, which gives him a Jewish identity as the heir of victims, who were somehow vindicated by the film director's success in telling a Jewish story of hope and rescue. Yet when Jacob discovers the man he takes to be Spielberg is not circumcised, the shattering of a myth of biological affinity dents the notion of a Jewish people. This is, again, a sad and perhaps cynical comment on the vacuity of Jewish American identity twice removed from the real world and from Jewish history.

Foer has an Israeli commentator say in a television interview that only an American Jew would ask why he has to care about Israel, but, in fact,

the lack of affiliation tested by the earthquake crisis results from the need of each of the Bloch family to carve out a space for a self when all is falling apart. Here, we must call on the concept of necessary destruction. In order to establish identity, there has first to be destruction, as in Sam's building of a *second* synagogue or in the fact that the Romans left the Western Wall standing. When the Wall (which Foer anachronistically insists on calling the "Wailing Wall") collapses on the TV screen, it is as if the tears and prayers it contained dissolve, making concrete Jacob's inability to keep his family safe, not just help them feel safe, but also demonstrating his inability to contain the hurt he has caused.

This is the core of what it means to feel Jewish in Foer's fictional universe. Remembering a film of Nazis massacring naked Jews, Sam has an uncertain feeling of loneliness, of suffering, that has to do with "stubborn belief, and stubborn dignity, and stubborn joy. And yet it wasn't really any of those things, or the sum of them. It was the feeling of being Jewish. But what was that feeling?"⁸⁵ To return to Devorah Baum's remarks (quoted in the introduction), "feeling Jewish" is a very human feeling, yet it begs the question of what feeling human is. Foer answers this question by ending the novel with a corrected perspective, with the putting down of the family's dog Argus, as if divorce and destruction should be rethought in terms of the mortality of all living species on the planet. More importantly, it represents a letting go of what has come to an end and being grateful for the small comforts of life, for the animalistic thrill of being alive (as when Tamir persuades Jacob to jump the fence into the lion's den at the zoo). Letting go is all about being oneself, unencumbered by binding covenantal and communal ties. Argus was Odysseus's faithful hound, who finally gave up the ghost after his master returned home incognito. In this postmodern odyssey, letting go implies an anti-homecoming.

It Always Gets Worse, Never Better

Why the gloomy doomsday forecast in these novels? As the sociologist Ilan Zvi Baron has argued, the old "Jewish Question," which posed a choice between Zionism and assimilation, was apparently solved by the creation of a Jewish State, but the existence of Israel has opened up new questions for diaspora Jews who no longer had to make that choice, at least until the wave of anti-Jewish attacks in France, the United States, and elsewhere.⁸⁶ Perhaps, as Baron surmises, the wrong question is being asked about American Jews' affinity with Israel,⁸⁷ because it fails to take into account the non-binary composition of American Jewish identities, which show varying degrees of identification with Israel, as I noted in Chapter 3. Moreover, some American Jews feel no qualms in supporting a BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) platform that calls for the "dismantling" of Israel.

What is especially disturbing about the texts I have discussed in this chapter is their relational focus on Jewish identity, in which the individualistic

hub of desire is detached from communal or national Jewish politics and fragments when impacted unexpectedly by a new collective crisis. This is what happens in David Samuel Levinson's dystopian novel, *Tell Me How This Ends Well* (2017), set in Los Angeles, where the Jacobson family is

like a terrifying golem made from the clay of behavioral tics and personality disorders—a litany of ills and a penchant for hypochondriasis and full-blown neuroses, with bouts of accompanying sanctimony, blinding narcissism, and a plain, old-fashioned, wrath-of-God-style guilt, which bind it all together in a neat package.⁸⁸

Here, the potent symbols of Jewish affiliation are imbued with doom and destruction. The traditional Jewish time-space of the Passover *seder* (filmed on reality TV) reveal not family unity but disarray: an obnoxious and abusive father whom his children wish dead, while their mother is slowly dying. This night is different from all other nights, not as the Passover song goes, but because of the intentions of parricide and the real sacrificial blood the children smear on the door (not the doorpost) to ward off the Angel of Death—as it transpires, ineffectually. There is no redemptive narrative of an exodus to the Promised Land, only a looking back to some imagined symbiosis in Weimar Germany. In the future year 2022, the threat of death is coming from outside, as America has become unsafe for Jews: “They’d given Israel back, yet the world still came for them.”⁸⁹ This thought made what her brothers plan to do seem to Edith so much more reproachable. Edith is the “ethicist” who puts her foot down on the gas at a fascist demonstration on campus and is arrested for endangering the demonstrators. Yet she is just as sex-hungry as everyone else (she stalks her married ex-lover and enjoys watching a video phone message of her Israeli toy-boy Ephraim masturbating in the shower). As in *Here I Am*, the family is too narcissistically involved in its own quarrels and emotional breakups to cope with anything outside their lives except in fantasies and dreams. Yet in both novels, the American Jew, enfranchised earlier than in Europe and enjoying the liberal traditions of the American Revolution, is surprisingly troubled by fundamental questions of home and loyalty. The events in Charlottesville in August 2017 during the Unite the Right Rally revealed widespread White supremacy and open anti-Semitism, as did the Pittsburgh and Poway synagogue shootings and the following attacks on Jews and synagogues around the United States. Writing shortly before these events, Levinson knew with no less certainty than Chabon that Abraham Lincoln’s America maintained racial segregation as official policy for many years and that open anti-Semitism should not come as a surprise. As Philip Roth postulated in *The Plot Against America*, if Lindbergh had become President, there would have been nobody to defend the Jews.⁹⁰

The cancellation of a progressive future that was once the foundation of enlightened thought and the touchstone of liberal democracy is not,

however, limited to a pessimistic and regressive prognosis of disaster for the Jews. The continuity of the past in the future, which stood at the center of the Cultural Zionism we identify with Ahad Ha'am, is no longer viable after the "end of history" proclaimed by Francis Fukkuyama, when there is no progressive future to which to look forward. Frederic Jameson, writing at the close of the twentieth century, spoke of "an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that."⁹¹ Moreover, the narrative revision of a past, indeed the reconceptualization of a common past, transforms our understanding of the present and blocks any clear vision of a possible future that is not dystopic or not significantly different from the present. In the post-Holocaust and post-9/11 limbotopia, it can only get worse.⁹²

Neuland: An Alternate History of the Old New Country

In Foer's *Here I Am*, Jacob and his children rename and reconstitute their new house after the divorce in order to make it a home. But naming does not make the house any more homely or plaster over the fissures in the family. As we see in Eshkol Nevo's Hebrew novel *Arb'uah batim vga'agua* (2004; *Homesick*, 2010), it is possible to have a roof over one's head and still yearn for love, stranded in a life one does not recognize as one's own. Nevo describes this as finding oneself by mistake in a house of mourning or sitting in the street with all one's furniture arranged as if in one's own home. Here, walls divide people and communities rather than protect or shelter them. The hole in the dividing wall in Amir and Noa's apartment is a practical, though not original, device to switch on the water heater and to have erotic fantasies about the neighbor's wife on the other side. When they split up, each of the lovers face their loneliness in a comic satire of secular Israeli society: Amir is pursued by a succession of young women carrying pots of *kubeh*; Noa is approached at the bar by men eager to take her home with them. Nevo's novels specialize in broken relationships and are preoccupied with the futility of love; the breakdown of marriage and the breakup of family leave loneliness as the only option, as in the novellas in *Gever nikhnas lepardes* (*A Man Entered Paradise*, 2021). Yet, Nevo's theme of the failure of home or homeland to sustain identity is hardly exceptional in contemporary Israeli novels that undo the trope of Israel as the Jewish home and posit it as a contested space from which another people were dispossessed. *Homesick* is set in Ma'oz Tsion, a small town built in 1951 by Iraqi and Iranian Jews (today part of Mevaseret Zion, just outside Jerusalem) on the site of a former Arab Palestinian village, which allows Nevo to contemplate, though not adopt, the idea of the homesickness of the former inhabitants.⁹³ We have already seen in Michal Govrin's *Snapshots* (discussed in Chapter 3) an attempt to reformulate the imaginary place of Israel in the ideological rift between Ilana's father, to whom she addresses her narrative and who built his life on love of Zion, and her Arab lover Sayyid, for whom places on the

map have been erased. Ilana's death prevents the realization of her project to construct the ultimate Jewish space of the *sukkah* on a Sabbatical Mountain, and the continued violence that pulls Israelis and Arabs further apart make it seem an impossible utopia at the end of the novel.⁹⁴

Yet place is not contiguous with space, and the alternative history novel imagines a reconfiguration of Jewish space as well as other lives and other loves freed from the post-Oslo impasse and from the hypermediated polarization of secular and religious societies in Israel. Nevo's *Neuland* (2011; *Neuland*, 2014) is just such an attempt to fantasize an alternative to the stress of Israel's *matsav*, its security situation, and to escape the loneliness of unhappy families. Dori, who has become gradually estranged from his wife, sets out on a trip to South America in search of his missing father, a 60-year-old Israeli veteran of the Yom Kippur War who is looking for a drug that would relieve his nightmares of the war. There, Dori falls in love with a radio journalist called Inbar, who is bored with her partner and is trying to sort herself out, while dreaming up erotic scenarios in which she sleeps with a Mossad agent or with a total stranger. Inbar wishes to escape her dissatisfied life in Israel as well as the pressure to have children, the breakup of her parents' marriage, a disturbing incident at work, and the mysterious death of her soldier brother.

Not unlike Liam Emmanuel's escape from Israel in Semel's dystopia, getting on a plane is the perfect way to simply get rid of the stress of Israel and of broken relationships, both of which have lost their original passion and idealism. Nevo's generation needs an "escape room" and many do escape like Inbar to places like India and South America as well as Berlin, where there is a growing community of Israelis with their own network of translators, intermediaries, and brokers, a space that has become transnational, beyond the dichotomy of diaspora and homeland. The Israeli backpackers in the Far East and South America wish to take a break from their frustration with Israel's political and security situation and form an expatriate community on the road of like-minded individualistic and restless young men and women who are trying out the survival skills they learned in the army and who want simply to clean out their heads before returning with new ideas about themselves and their society. These wandering enclaves form alternate spaces, a heterotopia of exilic nomadism that characterized Israeli backpackers before the corona virus pandemic in 2020, when most of them were airlifted back to Israel.⁹⁵

Nevo's title refers to Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland*, yet here the "New Land" is not the ancient homeland of the Jews, but some Other Place, new because it is cut off from all the guilt, pain, loss, and traumatic memory of the past. *Neuland*, a safe haven in Argentina for Jews fleeing Israel, not far from Baron Hirsch's agricultural colony, enshrines the universalistic principles of Herzl's utopian novel, a model ecumenical society that mirrors the ideals which Nevo evidently thinks Israel should have achieved. It is not meant to be a substitute for Israel, but its shadow, which reminds Israel of

what it could be.⁹⁶ It serves as a therapeutic resort for young Israelis who traveled to Latin America after their army service, some of whom were battle-shocked and traumatized by their combat experiences. This is where Dori finds his father, Menny Peleg, who turns out to be the chief guru, Mr. Neuland himself. Neuland, his father explains, is there to be a vision of the future, after the state of Israel outlives its purpose of gathering the exiles. Only here, Menny believes, far from the crush and push of Israel, could the idealists put into practice their vision, like Rabbi Yokhanan ben Zak-kai who asked for Yavneh after the destruction of the Temple. Once more, destruction is the prerequisite for an alternate ideological and spiritual space. Only after destruction, Menny tells Dori, could there be a new Judaism purged of its burdens and flaws. Again, the necessary destruction is cathartic rather than redemptive. Paradoxically, the man who abandoned his family and disappeared talks of Neuland as a family that restores love and enlightenment, that translates the idealism of Yehuda Halevi and Herzl into a universalism not centered on a single territory.⁹⁷ It is a generation who experience disillusion, unable to derive any inspiration from their parents' struggle for the Promised Land. Like Dori's father, Inbar's father goes abroad, setting up a new family in Australia, while Inbar's mother lives with her German lover in Berlin. Significantly, she is writing a dissertation on the legend of the Wandering Jew. Another backpacker or traveler who dogs the path of Doron and Inbar in their travels across South America leaves the iconic sign of the Wandering Jew scrawled on hotel walls, suggesting that exilic nomadism is nothing new. The generational paradigm is completed by Inbar's grandmother Lily who represents the displaced refugees of the Holocaust and who gave up love to stick it out in the new Jewish state despite misgivings and hardships.

The message of Rabbi Yokhanan ben Zakkai's bid for Jewish continuity has, however, not died. Amid the chaos of extended families seeking refuge from Hezbollah missiles landing in northern Israel, Dori returns to Jerusalem, where he hears a rabbi retelling the legend of Rabbi Yokhanan ben Zakkai asking for Yavneh and its sages. He looks out together with Inbar from the site of the ruined Temple toward the Judean desert at a vision of the future, as if the destruction would allow a new beginning in an Israeli Altneuland that would be unfettered by marital ties and loyalty and that would allow them to lay the Wandering Jew to rest. Although it sounds more like an erotic Shangri-La than the view which we are offered from Mount Nevo of a new Yavneh, the novel ends with a dream of a more hopeful future.

Commenting on the irony that Herzl's ideals should be realized in the diaspora in Semel's *Isra Isle*, Nevo's *Neuland*, and Yoav Avni's *Hertsl amar* (Herzl Said, 2011), a fantasy of the fictional establishment of a Jewish state in East Africa (as in the Uganda Plan), historian Michael Brenner observes that these imaginary alternatives based on real proposals all come at a time when liberal progressive intellectuals are debating whether Israel has a right

to exist. These novels share, he continues, an escapism which blurs fiction and reality.⁹⁸ Yet this existential anxiety, common to much postmodernist writing, comes when European and American Jews are once more concerned about their safety and when mainstream public discourses are resorting to Holocaust denial and anti-Semitic language in their anti-Israel rhetoric. Moreover, Herzl's vision of the Jewish state in *Altneuland*, which was apparently vindicated by Israel's success as a dynamic society and thriving economy, has been reimagined and inverted to rethink the foundations on which Israel and Jewish identity stand. Zion is no longer to be considered the only place of longing and belonging. Home is both everywhere and nowhere. Discussing the porous cultural boundaries through the ages between Jews and Gentiles as well as among Jews, historian David Biale wondered whether:

rather than an end to Jewish wandering, the new nation of Israel may be only the latest phase in an eternal cycle of leaving and returning, homeland and exile. And the boundaries of Jewish identities will inevitably be drawn on the continuum between them.⁹⁹

The Jewish Question is not answered in these novels by a Jewish state as it is in the Zionist revolution.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, these novelists prefer to see the Jews wandering eternally, finding the meaning of their Jewishness in diaspora rootlessness, extraterritoriality, and placelessness. Ulysses is left to enjoy his adventures, which would be spoilt by the finality and closure of a homecoming. In Josh Cohen's *Moving Kings*, the lawless David King rejects Israel as a refuge, as an escape from the dangerous life he enjoys. But then, as in Josh Cohen's comic campus novel *The Netanyahus* (2021), history is always in doubt and American Jewish attitudes toward Israel are the subject of counter-factual ironies; indeed, we cannot in the present virtual reality of cyberspace in which the New York intellectual lives take any identity seriously, including that of Josh Cohen, as we see in his *Book of Numbers* (2015), as he taxis from one drinking and sex party to another, even if death in the collapse of the Twin Towers seems real enough. In these "strange times to be a Jew," a phrase used in a different context in Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, nobody is safe anywhere. In Roth's *The Plot Against America*, the "what if?" situation serves to highlight the precariousness of Jewish comfort and respectability in America, but Chabon's rewriting of history insists on an unending repetition of the narrative of destruction and being moved on, *nokh amol*—again and again.¹⁰¹ At the same time, postmodern uncertainty is cast over the possibility of all social and emotional relations in a post-apocalyptic age of catastrophe. Significantly, both Semel and Chabon employ a detective to unravel the mystery of a pseudo-redeemer, and in both cases, the disappearance of an anti-messianic figure leads to the discovery of an alternate history which cancels out historical development. However, in the end, there is no escape from the end of Jewish history.

Undoing Jewish Spaces

I wish to conclude this chapter by considering the implications of post-modern conceptualizations of Jewish spaces, which we see in the instability and multivalence of the home. In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and , as Mike Witcombe has commented, “home” is no longer confined within secure boundaries and the metaphorical ‘*eruv* that defines “Jewish” space has proven permeable and precarious.¹⁰² Witcombe is enlarging on Daniel Anderson’s theory that in Chabon’s fiction the imagination maps onto the world the contours of ideological values, much as the *halakhic* boundary line of the ‘*eruv* inscribes onto the urban landscape Jewish values of time and space. Chabon remaps Jewish spaces in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* to stake a claim for a non-territorial diasporism and deconstructs the ‘*eruv* as a manipulation of power relations by religious Jews. In Chabon’s distorted view of Hasidism as a criminal organization, the ‘*eruv* on the Verbover sect’s island is a “typical Jewish dodge, a scam run on God” devised by Zimbalist the “boundary maven” that interposes into modernity a reconstructed Ukrainian *shtetl*, a Disney World planet of religious Jews.¹⁰³ According to Anderson, the ‘*eruv* here creates a multivalent space that can contain the public and the private, the religious and the secular, but resists a common identity.¹⁰⁴ On the contrary, Chabon is saying the Verbover Hasidim instill fear in their fellow Jews who do not share their devotion to heavenly authority and whom they do not accept as Jews. Yet their ‘*eruv* wields power over the souls of the religious Jews who are afraid of desecrating the Sabbath, and its potential surveillance by the maintenance crew commands respect.

The ‘*eruv* demarcates the security and insecurity of Jewish space also in *Here I Am*. Meditating on the suicides in the cemetery where his grandfather Isaac had just been buried, whose shame he would like to enclose and remove, Jacob thinks of the ‘*eruv*, the wire surrounding neighborhoods that divides public from private space, as a boundary between the living and the dead, the human and the animal, but also (in the marriage band on his finger) a metal circle that both divides and joins himself and Julia, an architect who deals with the ‘*eruv* and other boundary lines in her professional work.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, in these novels the ‘*eruv* no longer has any legal or binding status and marks off a virtual Jewishness, not a living space. In the modern urban communities of the East Coast or North-West London, by contrast, the ‘*eruv* is all but invisible, despite its implications for ethnogeographical demography, and does not figure in secular culture.

Chabon has explained that his use of the ‘*eruv* in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* applies to all boundaries, walls, and checkpoints that defend religious laws, racial purity, divisions of all kinds, and the power structures of Judaism itself, particularly its endogamy rules. In his commencement address at Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles, in 2018, Chabon explained that he had left off religious observance despite bringing up his children in Jewish traditions and that he welcomed miscegenation even if it meant the end of

Judaism. Yet, he wanted his children to marry a Jew if Judaism would adopt diversity and knock down all walls:

So now, today, at this retrograde and perilous moment in history, when ideologues are busily trying to string the world with *eruvim* of intolerance, were you to ask me if I hope my children marry-in, I would say, Yes. I want them to marry into the tribe that prizes learning, inquiry, skepticism, openness to new ideas. I want my children to marry into the tribe that enshrines equality before the law, and freedom of conscience, and human rights. I want them to marry into the tribe that sees nations and borders as antiquated canards and ethnicity as a construct prone, like all constructs, to endless reconfiguration.¹⁰⁶

Chabon is lashing out at the metaphorical and physical ‘*eruv* here because it contains and protects the walls dividing Judaism from diversity or hybridity and perpetuates the differentiation between sacred and profane, permitted and forbidden that offends his universalistic sensibilities and his fluid sense of ethnic identity.

A more apt but no less ambivalent spatialization of the relation of self to Jewish history is the *boydem*, which (as we have seen) figures as an image of shelter but also of legacy, a darkroom (as Semel calls it) where the past is hidden and one can hide, where heirlooms and junk are dumped in an undifferentiated heap. It has in Hebrew an air of hopeless abandonment but also a burden that cannot be easily got rid of. To extricate a legacy of the past from the *boydem* is thus a painful act that can unsettle the present (as in David Grossman’s *See Under: Love* and in Nicole Krauss’s *Great House*). As an attic, it is a precarious hiding place, most iconically associated with Anne Frank, who still haunts postwar America in Roth’s *The Ghost Writer* and Shalom Auslander’s *Hope: A Tragedy*. It is a space that defines a Jewishness built on paranoiac fears, but it also makes the ghostly presence of the traumatic past felt in the postmodern Jewish imagination. The *boydem* is above all a placeholder for the inability to complete mourning as well as a familiar space for homesickness in a postmodernist transformation of romantic or modernist longing in exile. The ruins of the Temple, the literary critic Assaf Inbari has asserted, ensure desire for return and redemption, because Israel is “a home made entirely from a longing for home.”¹⁰⁷ As we will see in the next chapter, the yearning for the Land is paradoxically realized in post-Destruction exile when the Land is absent or lost.

Notes

- 1 Bernard Wasserstein, “End of the Jewish People?” *Jewish Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1995): 5–10. See Bernard Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews in Europe since 1945* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996). The conclusion that the diaspora and Israel represented divided ideas of Jewish identity seemed to Michael

- J. Koplow to be substantiated by a 2018 American Jewish Committee report which indicated Israel and the diaspora could no longer be seen as a single entity (“The End of the Jewish People Is Here,” *Forward*, June 11, 2018; <https://forward.com/opinion/402932/the-end-of-the-jewish-people-is-here/>).
- 2 For warnings of civil war or the destruction of Israel, see for example Gregg Carlstrom, *How Long Will Israel Survive?: The Threat from Within* (London: Hurst, 2017).
 - 3 Nathan Englander, *Dinner at the Center of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 2017), 9–10.
 - 4 Y. Rosenblum, “A Battle over Symbols,” *Mishpacha*, July 5, 2017, 15.
 - 5 Noam Gil, “The Destruction of Israel and Other Fantasies in Jewish American Literature,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 39, no. 2 (2020): 161–81.
 - 6 Adam Rovner, “Forcing the End: Apocalyptic Israeli Fiction, 1971–2009,” in *Narratives of Dissent: War in Contemporary Israeli Arts and Culture*, ed. Rachel S. Harris and Ranen Omer-Sherman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 205–20.
 - 7 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), 259–60. Lyotard distinguishes between Benjamin’s Angel, who sees only disaster in the past, and a Hegelian approach, in which it is the “re-view” that “dis-asters” the past (*Toward the Postmodern*, ed. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1993], 146).
 - 8 On the changing configuration of home in contemporary Israeli art and the subversion of the family gaze, see Yael Guilat, “‘Living Room’ and ‘Family Gaze’ in Contemporary Israeli Art: Comparative Perspectives on Cultural-Identity Representations,” *Israel Studies* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 24–53. The instability of home is a familiar motif in Israeli literature, for example in the writing of Ronit Matalon; see Naama Tsal, “‘He Is Missing. You Were Missing. Home Is Missing’: Formation, Collapse and the Idea of the Home in the Later Poetics of Ronit Matalon,” *Prooftexts* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 303–20.
 - 9 See Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (London: Continuum, 2007). See also Simon J. Bronner, ed., *Jews at Home: The Domestication of Identity* (London and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010).
 - 10 Ron Rosenbaum, “‘Second Holocaust,’ Roth’s Invention Isn’t Novelistic,” *Observer*, April 15, 2002; <http://observer.com/2002/04/second-holocaust-roths-invention-isnt-novelistic/>; accessed February 4, 2018.
 - 11 Ron Rosenbaum, “‘Second Holocaust.’”
 - 12 “Thinking the Unthinkable: A Lamentation for the State of Israel,” *Tablet Magazine*, December 14, 2015; <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/195438/lamentation-for-israel>; accessed February 4, 2018.
 - 13 Tresa Grauer, “‘A Drastically Bifurcated Legacy’: Homeland and Jewish Identity in Contemporary Jewish American Literature,” in *Divergent Jewish Cultures: Israel and America*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore and S. Ilan Troen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 238–55.
 - 14 For the intellectual genealogy of the extraterritorial homeland in Steiner and Butler, see Vivian Liska, “Jewish Displacement as Experience and Metaphor in 20th-Century European Thought,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 30 (2018): 100–12. Vivian Liska points out the contradiction in Steiner’s tenacity in denial of Jewish exclusivity and his qualified embrace of Jewish exemplarity (*German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife: A Tenuous Legacy* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017], 146–47).

- 15 Michael Brenner, *In Search of Israel: The History of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 188–91.
- 16 Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Galut betokh ribonut: levikoret ‘shlilat hagalut’ batarbut hayisraelit,” *Teoriya ubikoret* 4 (Fall 1993): 23–55; 5 (Fall 1995): 113–32; English version: “Exile within Sovereignty: Critique of ‘the Negation of Exile’ in Israeli Culture,” in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept*, ed. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 393–420. Twenty-five years later, Raz-Krakotzkin reflected on his essay and the debate which followed it: “Mi ani lelo galut?” [“Who Am I without the Exile?”], *Teoriya ubikoret* 50 (Winter 2018): 89–102. See also Raz-Krakotzkin, “Exile, History, and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory: Some Reflections on the Zionist Notion of History and Return,” *Journal of Levantine Studies* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 37–70. On how Raz-Krakotzkin and other self-styled “postzionists” drew on postmodern and postcolonial theorists to undo the discourses of power through their reformulation of “exile” and “redemption,” see Laurence Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). For a critique of Ilan Pappé’s postmodern view that all history is politically constructed and that the Zionist narrative is no more than a subjective interpretation of the facts, see Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007). 4–8.
- 17 Karen Grumberg, *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse, NJ: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 15–17.
- 18 See David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986). For a different perspective, see Ruth R. Wisse, *Jews and Power* (New York: Schocken, 2007).
- 19 Walter Reich, “The Despair of Zion,” *Wilson Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 55.
- 20 See Andrew M. Gordon, “Alternate Jewish History: Philip Roth’s *The Plot against America* and Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*,” in *New Directions New Directions in Jewish American and Holocaust Literatures: Reading and Teaching*, ed. Victoria Aarons and Holli Levitsky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 85–101.
- 21 See Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn’t: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- 22 Caroline Rody, “The Magical Book within the Book: I. B. Singer, Bruno Schulz, and Contemporary Jewish Post-Holocaust Fiction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier (Cham: Palgrave, 2020), 350–51.
- 23 Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1–2.
- 24 Devorah Baum, *Feeling Jewish (a Book for Just about Anyone)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 16–18. See pp. 3–4 above.
- 25 David Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 11–39. See also Eunice G. Pollack, *From Antisemitism to Anti-Zionism: The Past & Present of a Lethal Ideology* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2017).
- 26 For an alternate reading of this episode in the novel in terms of the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, see Ruth Gilbert, “‘No Outlines’: From Dystopia to Heterotopia in Howard Jacobson’s *£*,” *Journal of European Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2016): 9–19. See also Ruth Gilbert, “Reality Gaps: Negotiating the Boundaries of British-Jewish Identities in Contemporary Fiction,” in *Boundaries, Identity,*

- and *Belonging in Modern Judaism*, ed. Maria Diemling and Larry Ray (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 107–20; David Brauner, *Howard Jacobson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
- 27 Jacobson, £ , revised edition (London and New York: Hogarth, 2015), 141–42.
- 28 See Mary Luckhurst, “The Case of Theresa,” in *Morality and Justice: The Challenge of European Theatre*, ed. Edward Malcolm Batley and David Bradby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 255–68.
- 29 Quoted from the version adapted from Jacobson’s 2013 speech at the B’nai Brith World Center in Jerusalem, *Jewish Forward*, October 20, 2013; <http://forward.com/culture/books/185720/will-we-ever-be-forgiven-for-the-holocaust/>.
- 30 See Axel Stähler, “The Writing on the Wall: Israel in British Jewish Fiction, Post-Lebanon,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction*, ed. David Brauner and Axel Stähler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 254; see also Stähler, “Antisemitism and Israel in British Jewish Fiction: Perspectives on Clive Sinclair’s *Blood Libels* (1985), and Howard Jacobson’s *The Finkler Question* (2010),” *Jewish Culture and History* 14, no. 2–3 (2013): 112–25. On the trope of the Land of Israel as a loved woman, see Chapter 6.
- 31 See Adam Rovner, “Alternate History: The Case of Nava Semel’s *IsraIsland* and Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*,” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 9, no. 1 (2011): 131–52.
- 32 On Mordecai Noah’s Ararat project, see Jonathan Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981); Adam Rovner, *In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands before Israel* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 15–43.
- 33 Sarah Phillips Casteel, “Jews among the Indians: The Fantasy of Indigenization in Mordecai Richler’s and Michael Chabon’s Northern Narratives,” *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 4 (2009): 778–79. See also Jennifer Glaser, “An Imaginary Ararat: Jewish Bodies and Jewish Homelands in Ben Katchor’s *The Jew of New York*,” *MELUS* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 153–73.
- 34 Nava Semel, *Isra Isle*, trans. Jessica Cohen (Simsbury, CN: Mandel Vilar Press, 2016), 71–72; *I-Srael* (Tel Aviv: Maskel, 2005), 87–88.
- 35 Semel, *Isra Isle*, 73; *I-Srael*, 89. See Rachel Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).
- 36 Adam Rovner, interview with Nava Semel quoted in Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe*, 173. In real life, Native Americans (who were often identified in colonial New England with the Lost Tribes) have identified with the indigeneity of the Jews in their ancient lands; see for example Lisa Klug, “Indigenous Activist Advocates for Israelis’ ‘Native’ Rights,” *Times of Israel*, May 9, 2016; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/indigenous-activist-advocates-for-israelis-native-rights/>; accessed April 27, 2018.
- 37 Semel, *Isra Isle*, 95; *I-Srael*, 113.
- 38 Semel, *Isra Isle*, 101; *I-Srael*, 119.
- 39 Semel, *Isra Isle*, 97; *I-Srael*, 116.
- 40 Semel, *Isra Isle*, 136; *I-Srael*, 158.
- 41 Semel, *Isra Isle*, 148; *I-Srael*, 170.
- 42 The implied analogy between Jews’ settlement of their ancestral homeland and White settlement of Native American territory is a commonplace of post-Zionist rhetoric but factually flawed: in Hebrew, the terms for “settlement” (*hit-yashvut* and *hitmakhalut*) have different political meanings, but in anti-Israel propaganda they have been conflated with the term used in colonialist settings. See Derek J. Penslar, “‘Algebra of Modernity’: How Should We Understand the Relation between Zionism and Colonialism?” in *Colonialism and the Jews*, ed.

- Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 317–40.
- 43 Semel, *Isra Isle*, 171, 172; *I-Srael*, 196.
- 44 Louis Kaplan, “Mapping Ararat: Augmented Reality, Virtual Tourism, and Grand Island’s Jewish Ghosts,” *New Centennial Review* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 239–40. The project can be found at <http://www.mappingararat.com>.
- 45 Kaplan, “Mapping Ararat,” 239–64.
- 46 Roth, “Networks,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Jewish Cultures*, ed. Laurence Roth and Nadia Valman (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 207.
- 47 See Derek J. Penslar, “Shlomo Sand’s *The Invention of the Jewish People* and the End of the New History,” *Israel Studies* 17, no. 2 (2012): 156–68.
- 48 Rovner, *In the Shadow of Zion*, 225–26.
- 49 Rovner, “Alternate History,” 139–41. Rovner’s metaphor of a swinging “pendulum” is not consistent with chaos theory, which admits the possibility that contingency can be traced in a predetermined pattern, such as computerized simulations of fractals. See Kathleen Singles, *Alternate History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 189–215.
- 50 Chabon, letter to Adam Rovner, January 5, 2008, quoted in Rovner, *In the Shadow of Zion*, 42. For a comparison of Semel’s and Chabon’s novels, see Rovner, “Alternate History.”
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- 53 Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (London: Harper, 2008).
- 54 Inbar Kaminsky, “Solving the Jewish Case: Metaphysical Detection in Michael Chabon’s *The Final Solution* and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*,” in *Michael Chabon’s America: Magical Words, Secret Worlds, and Sacred Spaces*, ed. Jesse Kavadlo and Bob Batchelor (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 162–63. For a general introduction to the novel as “poplit,” see Helene Meyers, *Reading Michael Chabon* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2010), 53–67.
- 55 For a discussion of the creation of an imaginary “Yiddishland” as an American Jewish utopian space, see Glaser, “An Imaginary Ararat.”
- 56 Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, 23.
- 57 Scales, *Alternate History*, 208–11.
- 58 Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, 17.
- 59 Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, 368.
- 60 For a postcolonial reading of *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, see Gil, “The Destruction of Israel”: 170–72.
- 61 Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, 411.
- 62 Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, 411.
- 63 Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe*, 174–78.
- 64 Sarah Phillips Casteel, “Jews among the Indians: The Fantasy of Indigenization in Mordecai Richler’s and Michael Chabon’s Northern Narratives,” *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 4 (2009): 802–05.
- 65 Casteel, “Jews among the Indians,” 799 n24.

- 66 Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, 202.
- 67 Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 723.
- 68 For a comparison of the appropriation of the "northern" experience in Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here* and Chabon's *Yiddish Policemen's Union* as ironic ways of locating the text in a national narrative, see Casteel, "Jews among the Indians," 779, 794–99. On the context of 9/11, see Scanlan, "Strange Times to Be a Jew," 503–31; Brygyda Gasztold, "Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* as a 9/11 Novel," in *Ideological Battlegrounds – Constructions of Us and Them After 9/11*, ed. Joanna Witkowski and Uwe Zagazki (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), vol. 1, 70–83.
- 69 On how Chabon writes back to Norman Mailer's macho heroes in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, see Warren Rosenberg, "Trouble on Max Nordau Street: Michael Chabon Rewrites Jewish Masculinity," in Harry Brod and Shawn Israel Zevit, eds., *Brother Keepers: New Perspectives on Jewish Masculinity* (Harriman, TN: Men's Studies Press, 2010), 160–73.
- 70 Scales, *Alternate History*, 204–05.
- 71 Ruth R Wisse, "Slap Shtick: Review of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon," *Commentary* (July 2007); <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-yiddish-policemens-union-by-michael-chabon/>; accessed February 7, 2018; Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Touching on History and Destiny: Review of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon," *New Leader* (May–August 2007): 35; D. G. Myers, "Michael Chabon's Imaginary Jews," *Sewanee Review* 116, no. 4 (2008): 572–88. On the logic of Chabon's made-up Yiddishland, see Singles, *Alternate History*, 197–200.
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- 74 Chabon, *Maps and Legends*, 159.
- 75 Chabon, *Maps and Legends*, 157.
- 76 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands – Essays and Criticism 1981–91* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 9–21.
- 77 Chabon, *Maps and Legends*, 166–79.
- 78 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Here I Am* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016), 195.
- 79 Noam Gil argues that the double plot builds an argument for a relational American Jewish identity free of the embarrassment of Israel ("The Destruction of Israel," 172–76).
- 80 Lawrence Langer, "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps," *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 222–31.
- 81 Foer, *Here I Am*, 36–37.
- 82 Leonard Felder, *Here I Am: Using Jewish Spiritual Wisdom to Become More Present, Centered, and Available for Life* (Boston, MA: Trumpeter, 2011), 12–21.
- 83 Victoria Aarons, *What Happened to Abraham?: Reinventing the Covenant in American Jewish Fiction* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 15.
- 84 According to the *Pew Religious Landscape Survey* (May 10, 2015), only 37% of American Jews reported certain belief in God and 35% reported that religion formed a significant part of their lives, compared with an overwhelming majority of Muslims and various Christian sects; 31% seldom or never attended religious services and only 19% attended regularly (<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>). This should be compared with the *Pew Portrait of*

- Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews* (2013), which found that 23% of all children living with a Jewish adult in the United States are not currently being raised as Jewish or partially Jewish. See the forum on the findings of this report in *The American Jewish Year Book, 2016, Volume 116*, ed. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 3–76.
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- 95 Rachel S. Harris, “Between the Backpack and the Tent”; Erik Cohen, “Taking Distance: Israeli Backpackers and their Society,” in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 265–76.
- 96 Eshkol Nevo, *Neuland* (Or Yehuda: Zemora-Bitan, 2011), 456; *Neuland* (London: Vintage, 2014), 515–16.
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- 106 Michael Chabon, "Those People, Over There," *Tablet Magazine*, May 30, 2018; <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/262965/michael-chabon-commencement>. Two Orthodox rabbis responded by pointing out the contradictions in Chabon's position and attacking his universalism as bogus; C. Strauchler and D. Wolkenfeld, "Saving Judaism from Michael Chabon," *Commentary* (August 2018); <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/saving-judaism-michael-chabon/>.
- 107 Assaf Inbari, "Forever Engaged, Never Married, to the Land of Israel," *Azure* (Summer 2007): 64.

6 The Afterlife of Love

The Remains of the Day

In Shaul Tchernichovsky's poem "Omrin yeshna erets..." ("There is a land"), written in Berlin in the 1920s and many years later sung in a different popular version by Naomi Shemer, the Hebrew poet wondered if the way to the Land was lost. However, postmodernism turns despair at achieving the dream into an aesthetics and an epistemology. As we saw in the previous chapters, the realization of the 2,000-year dream of return to the Land of Israel becomes less relevant in a global village of transnational multiple identities, where one can be at home in a heterogeneous, hybrid, postcolonial diaspora, a heterotopia of exilic nomadism. Yet, as Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi postulates, the journey was not always complete and the story of the pilgrims' recovery and discovery of the Land was often a story of longing for a place of origin not arrival, of exile not homecoming. Postmodernism blocked closure because it threatened what was suspending the irresolution of narrative. As Ezrahi reads what she calls "Jewish" poetics, the text is a form of exile itself, so that the stalling or negation of redemption enables the creative act of writing, but also gives new meaning to diaspora as a nomadic state of self-searching that can never be ended.¹ The political implication of this postmodern epistemology is seen in the permanent exile of post-Zionist diasporism.² The yearning for the Land of Israel, which was at the core of Abraham Mapu's novel *Love of Zion*, still thrives, but the fulfillment of love has led to disappointment and disillusionment when seen in retrospect, a deconstruction of love in the plot of the postmodern novel at personal and national levels.

Much has changed since A. B. Yehoshua diagnosed in his book-length essay *Bizkhit hanormaliyut* (1980; *Between Right and Right*, 1981) Israel's national neurosis as a contrary pull between internalization of a willed condition of exile and conflicted identities amid constant war in the Middle East. The Land of Israel, nevertheless, has always functioned in the Jewish imagination as a sacral space in the synecdoche of Zion or Jerusalem for the Jewish nation who forsook the Land; later, in modern times, it was displaced by constructions of the family home that surrogated for the Temple,

or enshrined the virtues of home as a space of bourgeois ideology and loyalty to the country of birth. In the Zionist version of the return to the Land, it was a political intervention in history that replaced the Temple with the nation-state. Yet, time and again, generational rebellion against the family home and the collective homeland has disrupted the narrative of Jewish continuity.³

At the end of this book, it is time to reflect on the intertwined love for the Land and love for a man or woman as desire that has not yet been fulfilled and might never be fulfilled at the end of life. The preoccupation with aging and a last chance for love in recent novels by middle-aged Jewish novelists is hardly unprecedented (think of Roth's 2006 novel *Everyman*). In Howard Jacobson's *Live a Little* (2019), the chance of love comes very late in life for Shimi, who has always felt a deficiency of love, when he is taken in by his dead brother Ephraim's former mistress, like him in her 90s, who could never give her lovers and sons the love they needed. Jacobson, like Tova Reich in *Mother India* (2018), looks at love and sex from old age, when one would not have expected the possibility of changing direction in love or beliefs. The existential flux of a post-apocalyptic view of the human condition coincides in the novels discussed in this chapter with the autumn of life and of love. In both *The History of Love* and *Great House*, the endurance of love is fragile and, in the absence of belief in an afterlife, the dim prospects of happiness in a mortal love seem limited to the rare moments of exhilaration in what Nadia calls in *Great House* the mystery of existence. The second chance for love in Zeruya Shalev's *Keev* (2015; *Pain*, 2019) can return the joy and freedom of youth, but at the price of pain to the family whom Iris loves. Shalev's study of what it means to live after a terrorist attack brings together personal and national pain, the suffering of the body and of love, when an arbitrary violent intrusion exposes the tensions and cracks in the family.

This chapter asks what remains of love as the novelists discussed in this book contemplate aging and the end of life. I will again bring Zeruya Shalev, here in her novel *Sheerit hekhayim* (2011; *The Remains of Love*, 2013), into conversation with Nicole Krauss, this time in *Forest Dark* (2017), and have Michael Chabon join them with his retrospective memoir of a dying American Jew in *Moonglow* (2016), while Ofir Touché Gafla considers love in the afterlife in *'Olam hasof* (2014; *The World of the End*, 2014). These novels take us into menopause and the waning of beauty, into the retrospect of old age and death, to consider the remains of love in the remains of life and to weigh up the price of life-changing decisions that could have brought metamorphosis and renewal, but all too often trap the protagonists in repetitive cycles of unrequited love.

The image of the aging body reflects changing views of Israel, again seen in the body-nation trope in a postmodern view of the decaying nation that lost its pioneering spirit. *The Remains of Love* opens with an elderly bedridden woman contemplating "the remains of life" (this phrase echoes the Hebrew title of the novel): "What is left for us in the evening of our days

other than the visions that linger in our mind's eye?"⁴ Before her lies the apparent eternity of dying alone in a room that seems to be shrinking, while her children and grandchildren grow up and live their lives separately from her. This dying alone requires strength that she does not have: "Even dying requires a measure of love, while she is no longer loved enough, and perhaps not loving enough, even for this."⁵ Hemda Horowitz's family does not abandon her, but their visits are filled with mutual repulsion, recriminations, and anger; their gifts are met with resentment and guilt. She is forced to stare at the lustrous table they force on her that makes her tiny room look even shabbier. The notebook in which she wants to express her thoughts about her life is significantly empty, an untold, elusive secret. What remains are her drooping body and the "gray flowers" of her nipples, which she compares with the sensuous, virginal body of her grandson which he delights in as a fresh discovery.

Her children too are eaten up by regret, conflicted by guilt and resentment at finding it is too late to fall in love or to have more children, angry at the fading of desire that left only painful memories. Trapped in unsatisfactory marriages, estranged from each other, they must consider their own mortality as they enter the twilight of life. In his wondering about the right thing to do, Avner realizes that his young lover Anat is getting married, while Dina also wonders about her life choices, now that she is left feeling lonely and unloved. During a lecture she is giving on the choices facing the Jews expelled from Spain, Dina expels a student who is breastfeeding her newborn in class, but regrets her cruelty, yet realizes she was driven by jealousy for what she cannot now have—the love of a child and the love of her mother. This metahistorical analogy of seeking love and faith after the loss of home brings Dina to make a choice. In one of the few life-changing decisions in this far from formulaic tale of midlife crisis, when Dina wonders "what she will do with the remains of her love, the remains of her life,"⁶ she decides to adopt a child, a sickly boy in Siberia, at the price of her marriage.

As Coetzee does in *Age of Iron*, Zeruya Shalev conflates the dying of political structures and deteriorating national health with the decay of an old woman diagnosed with terminal cancer. It is difficult now for her to walk, and Hemda remembers how as a girl her father beat her in order to make her walk on her own, how her domineering, uncompassionate father ignored her fears in training her as a tractor driver and kept her awake at night rowing a fishing-boat. Her loveless upbringing, overseen by the stern ideology and strict discipline of the kibbutz, was hardly compensated by a distant, absentee mother. The recollections of compulsion and coercion come together in solitude at the end of life and retrospectively inform Hemda's memories of her love life. All she can do is to look out the window at an Arab village and imagine her favorite landscape of the hills of the upper Galilee beckoning to her, once more reminding us of the eroticized image of the Land of Israel as a corporeal object of yearning. It is, as in Hemda's own name, *erets hemdah* (a land of desire) in the prophet Jeremiah's phrase when he admonished the

Jewish people for abandoning God who gave them the land of Israel (3:19), the precious land for which the Jewish people yearned yet dreaded its holiness and feared admonition for its defilement.⁷

This yearning is carried through in the metaphors and imagery of Hemda's relationship with the anthropomorphized Land. Hemda is unable to answer the seductive call of the lake where she longs to be a girl again and to bathe naked, to be washed clean, like the "Syrian general" (Na'amán in 2 Kings 5:1–19), who was miraculously cleansed of leprosy. The draining of the lake in the legendary feat in the 1950s of turning the Hula swamp into arable land resulted in personal disaster for her father, a fisherman, and disappointment for her. Here again, Shalev is subverting not only biblical references, but also the Zionist master narrative of redemption of the Land through human intervention in history and physical labor. In her delirium in the hospital, Hemda imagines her father forcing her to drink the lake dry, spoonful by spoonful. This forced ingestion projects her feelings toward her father of fear and desire, but also writes on her body the complex attitudes of a generation toward the Land in which they grew up and for which they fought, but which exacted an emotional and often traumatic price from their bodies and their psyches. Both Avner and Dina are psychologically damaged by their upbringing on the kibbutz, and Dina's bulimia reads as an inversion of Hemda's ingestion of the lake—vomiting the rich, heavy foods she has to eat, calling attention to her distress which nobody notices. Yet it also inverts the analogy of the Land vomiting out a sinful people in the reciprocal relationship between land and people in the biblical admonition in Leviticus that heinous crimes such as idolatry, a betrayal of love of God, will be punished by the land spewing out its inhabitants. In that reciprocity of Land and people, Hemda's surreal fantasy that the lake would fill her womb with water is an especially ambiguous image of impregnation and sterility that ironically recalls poetic conventions of Hebrew poetry of the pioneer settler generation.⁸ The topographical analogy has been used in Western culture more than once as an image of colonization, but here the literal imbibing of the lake brings repression of independence. For Hemda, motherhood comes together with the death of her father, as if her child replaced him not with new life but with an inability to nurture and with further dependency. Later, she imagines the fire of the burning peat pursuing her from the drained land to her room, where she lies bedridden and helpless. It seems to Hemda that her life has shrunk together with the lake, that she has dipped her fingers in the honeycomb but tasted nothing sweet.⁹ In line with the anthropomorphic trope, the Land loses its potency as the body of the woman ages and love no longer summons the full force of passion, but instead Hemda is left with fading memories of lost ideals and loved ones, lost youth and beauty.¹⁰

Zeruya Shalev is not presenting a post-Zionist critique out of disappointment in the idealism of the pioneers but draws on the familiar trope of the male lover in *Song of Songs*, who vainly sought his bride. In this allegory of the love affair between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, Assaf

Inbari likens Zionism to Jacob's desire for Rachel in the Bible, which could not be satisfied by marriage to Leah. By this analogy, Zionism remained poised between promise and fulfillment as long as the Jews yearned in their exile for their land, as long as the betrothal (a Talmudic status between engagement and marriage) remained eternal, as Hosea understood God's relationship with the Jewish nation. The lovesickness in Song of Songs, as in Emunah Elon's novel discussed in Chapter 4, results from the woman *not* opening the door to her lover. This interpretation accords with post-Zionist readings of the allegory of the love affair between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel.¹¹

Indeed, there is in this novel's ironic intertextuality a saddened realization that it is late in the day for idealism and that love has come too late for both personal and national self-fulfillment and renewal. This conclusion runs against the narrative of land and nation in both Socialist and Religious Zionism. In Yael Zerubavel's overview of the Zionist master narrative, political Zionism gave the mythical structure of exile a historical dimension by constructing a narrative of an ancient homeland (Canaan) that was lost as a result of defeat in the Bar Kokhba revolt, culminating in mass suicide at Masada, an act of heroism emulated in the twentieth century in the fall of Tel-Hai. Turning defeat into strength rejects the pattern of redemption and exile in rabbinical Judaism, which held divergent views of Bar Kokhba and voiced ambivalent attitudes toward martyrdom that was not *kiddush hashem* (as in the choice between mass suicide and forced conversion in the Crusades). The path of Masada is counterposed to Yokhanan ben Zakkai's choice of Yavneh, which (as we have seen) salvaged the continuity of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and later sustained the Oral Law in exile.¹² Instead of the exilic Jew's passive anticipation of a messianic redemption, Zion was to be regained by resettling the land and recreating the nation through the cultivation of the barren soil. Boaz Neumann has described the erotic desire of the early pioneers of the Second and Third Aliya for the Land as an existential and physical expression of love for the earth and of ecstasy at its transformation from virginal desert to first blossom. These idealists, mainly from the secular Zionist socialist movement, bonded intimately with nature, literally inseminating the soil and redeeming the Land.¹³ This was a rejection of the exiled Jews' neglect of the body and a call to return to the Jews' roots in their own land. We see this intimate bonding of body and land in A. D. Gordon's call for the restoration of harmony between body and nature through physical labor.¹⁴ And Micha Berdichevski famously summoned the people of Israel to redeem the Land by asking its forgiveness for 2,000 years of barrenness: "Remember that there are not two realms here—the world and man—for all is one, unique and special, all is infinite and endless."¹⁵ Indeed, Zionist mythology invested much in the image of the strong male body redeeming the land through physical labor.¹⁶

The symbolic relationship of body and land with its resettlement developed in the early twentieth century in the teachings of Rabbi Abraham

Isaac Kook that the people of Israel were rooted in the Land since *adam* (man) is etymologically derived in Hebrew from *adamah* (earth). Love and redemption will come, he predicted, when the Jews resettled the Land and reunited with their spiritual and geographical roots in a universal harmony of body and soul. The more desire (*tshukah*) and connection a person felt for the Land, writes Rabbi Kook in *Orot (Lights)*, the more his or her thoughts became purified by virtue of the “‘air of the land of Israel’ which hovered over all who long to see her [BT Ktubot 75a]: ‘Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad with her, all you who love her’ [Isaiah 66:10; BT Ta’anit 30a].”¹⁷ The relationship of the Jewish people with the Land of Israel was for Rabbi Kook intrinsic, not instrumental (as in Herzl’s Zionism, which sought a territorial refuge from persecution, whether in Israel or elsewhere). Rabbi Kook was fiercely opposed to the Uganda plan and fought against any territorial compromise as both futile and a betrayal of the fundamental principle of the Jewish people’s identity as a nation.¹⁸ Indeed, Rabbi Kook was well known for his praise of the non-religious pioneers who were redeeming the land by physical labor, bringing both themselves and the land back to bodily and spiritual health through the nation’s natural striving for redemption, which would bring about a universal spiritual enlightenment.¹⁹ The physical could not be redeemed without the spiritual, as the Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Israel Meir Hakohen Kagan, 1838–1933) commented in his exegesis of the Bible: the Torah was the soul of the Jewish people and its body was the Land of Israel, by itself no more than a clump of earth.²⁰

The Zionist socialist narrative secularized the religious pattern of exile and redemption but was itself deconstructed as a mythical invention. As Yael Zerubavel concludes, the secular identity of the nation seemed to be crumbling under multiple memories and the return of suppressed counter-narratives.²¹ Or to put it another way, Zionism created a homeland for the Jews, but failed to make the Jews at home in it.²² In this view, Jews remain a wandering people in the spirit of Franz Rosenzweig, who, in *Der Stern der Erlösung (The Star of Redemption)*, 1921, saw in the extraterritoriality of the Jewish people a negation of the blood-ties of other nations that linked indigeneity with land: “The land is in the deepest sense its own only as land of longing, as—holy land.”²³ For Israelis of the generation of Zeruya Shalev, brought up in the secular Zionist ideals of the pioneers, it is no longer worthy of remark, let alone regarded as a betrayal, to feel no ties to the Land, to be globe-trotters or live abroad.

The tandem betrayal of the Land and of love (familiar from Agnon) has been transformed into highly ambiguous relationships. The longed-for Promised Land is neither holy nor promised in Semel’s *Isra Isle*, which satirizes the yearning (*hemdah*) for the Land. In Nevo’s *Neuland*, explaining why she enjoys living in “Multi-Kulti” Berlin and has no longing for the Land, Inbar’s mother remarks, “perhaps, in the culture of the new millennium, there is no ‘there’ or ‘here,’ perhaps these concepts have become obsolete.”²⁴ The Promised Land is derided as a fool’s paradise in Chabon’s *The Yiddish*

Policemen's Union, and it is a promise not kept in Foer's *Here I Am*. In *The Remains of Love*, Dina goes far afield, to a distant strange land, to snow-bound Siberia, in order to realize her yearning for the child that she believed would satisfy her need to give love and whom she gives the name *hemdat*, after her mother but also in recognition of her own unsatisfied yearnings. There are other examples too in this novel of loosening or abandoning the bond of betrothal to the Land. Her brother Avner is a devoted but not particularly successful legal advocate for Bedouin land rights and defends Palestinian Arabs facing expulsion to natal towns or settlements. He escapes from domestic quarrels to pursue a mature childless woman Talia, although she loves a married man who recently died. She is, incidentally, another sterile Sleeping Beauty figure and twice falls asleep when he undresses her. When he licks the mud from her feet, he is imbibing the Land that degenerates into infertile clods from a vegetable garden, but he is also compulsively repeating his failure to consummate a relationship, a further reinforcement of the theme of dysfunctional marital relations and relations with the Land.

Searching for Redemption in Dark Forests

A deep ambivalence about commitment, whether to Israel or to marriage and love, characterizes Nicole Krauss's novel *Forest Dark*. Yet, for all its skepticism, this novel engages not with the nomadism or yearning for a lost ideal that we saw in previous chapters, but with redemption of the writing self, who seeks a place in the world not limited to a physical home or restricted to an identity imposed by a collective. Most of all, this is a novel about reclaiming authorship and reclaiming the self. Set mostly in Israel, Krauss's novel takes its title from Dante and looks for hope on the lost pathway of life to the desert as life's path approaches middle age:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward paths had been lost.²⁵

The Negev desert, which David Ben-Gurion prophesied (in a 1955 speech) would one day bloom, can still fire the imagination with visions of planting saplings for posterity. That redemptive vision promises a forest very different from the Dantean landscape of aging and despair, but, as in Dante, the writer figure seeks a way out of the metaphysical and psychological night in search of self in the dark forest after immeasurable and unspeakable collective suffering, in this case in the Holocaust, as well as personal anguish, in this case in lost love and unfulfilled desire.

In exploring the view from life's final stages, Krauss follows a wealthy retired New York lawyer Jules Epstein, who disappears in the Judean desert. In parallel chapters, an American novelist Nicole (the author's alter ego) finds herself abandoned in the same desert. Epstein returns us to the themes

of bereavement and marital breakdown in *Great House*, but also brings us to consider the emptiness of the self once the outer shell has been removed. Epstein, not yet 70, gives away his assets and belongings, including valuable works of art, except for a particularly affective Annunciation that is lost in bizarre circumstances, an example of the random happenstance in which Krauss's characters get caught up. Before Epstein's departure for Israel, he is literally stripped of his outer self when his coat is mistakenly purloined by a member of the Palestinian Arab delegation in New York, together with his mobile phone, which leaves him as he really is, separated from the outside world, estranged from his family, and vulnerable; he is in addition mugged at knifepoint. He faces the question "Ayeka?" ("where are you?"), the question God asked Adam in Genesis 3:9 after he sinned in the Garden of Eden, though here in a different context to the Hassidic interpretation that God was asking Adam where the man ("adam") in him is, where is his humanity. This is Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi's insight into God's call to Adam after he sinned in the Garden of Eden, "ayeka?"; not that God was unaware of Adam's whereabouts, but wanted him to take responsibility for his deeds and come to terms as a human being with his guilt: God is asking us in every generation where we are on our path in life.²⁶ Krauss apparently prefers Abraham Joshua Heschel's reading, in *God in Search of Man*, where he defines his philosophy of Judaism as God's search for a response to the call, "where are you?" The revelation to humankind at Sinai was a moment of witnessing the Divine Presence in this world, just as in the Garden of Eden God called out to Adam to answer, to respond: "Faith in God is a response to God's question. [...] Faith comes out of awe, [...] out of anxiety to answer the challenge of God, out of an awareness of our being called upon."²⁷ As Eli Lederhendler points out, the question "where are you" in Krauss's novel points to a search for one's place in the world, whether as a Jew or as a writer.²⁸ However, Adam (unlike Isaac) failed to respond with any statement of his moral responsibility.

The first chapter of *Forest Dark* is in fact entitled "Ayeka," which is a way of asking where identity is located in time and place, where is the self at home. Epstein returns to the Tel Aviv of his precipitous birth and, swimming out to sea, almost drowns in the universal "bathtub" that is the big maternal womb of humankind. Unexpectedly, he meets a mystical rabbi who whisks him off, not altogether willingly, to a Shabbat retreat in Safed, a favorite destination of many trekkers in search of mysticism. Epstein is determinedly agnostic, an old-timer out of a Bellow novel who learnt in life to trust only the rational and empirically verifiable, to reject all religion as sham and deceit. Epstein has no interest in the rabbi's exposition of *tsim-tsum*, the Lurianic doctrine of divine contraction in creation of the world, or its watered-down pop culture version that is delivered to us, but he wants an answer to the question which lies below his recent divestment of assets and of self, the question of what remains after the death of his parents and the dissolution of his marriage. What he discovers is an "emptiness [...] far

larger than what had once filled its place.”²⁹ That emptiness is reflected in the arid desert and the deep sea, which are timeless spaces, with no real past or future.

We return also to another theme of *Great House*, the metafictional writer’s block of an American Jewish author. As a child, Nicole stays every year in a Tel Aviv hotel and now she leaves her husband and children to return to this biological and psychological place of origin to write a novel, an act of recovery of self. Nicole traces her dissociation to seeing herself on television as a child, which gave her a sense of being in two places simultaneously, not fully herself and feeling for a short interval out of joint with time. She is, she thinks, quite simply suffering from nostalgia:

the longing for something I felt divided from, which was neither a time nor a place but something formless and unnamed, had been with me since I was a child. Though now I want to say that the division I felt was, in a sense, within me: the division of being here and not here. But rather *there*.³⁰

Split personality syndrome is often a symptom of post-traumatic depression, and it is clearly an expression of the divided self of the Jewish American writer pulled between Israel and the diaspora who has suffered personal and collective loss. However, Nicole feels this bizarre sensation is akin to *déjà vu* and relates it to her interpretation of Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny knowledge that a strange place is familiar. In his celebrated 1919 essay on the uncanny, Freud connected the *unheimlich* with its opposite, the homely and the native (*heimlich*, *heimisch*), but also with the secret that lies deep in the unconscious. Nicole applies Freud’s term to her sense of being unmoored from time and from events. When her taxi pulls up at the Hilton, a place she inhabited psychically for years but was now seeing for real, she is struck by a confluence of the strange and the familiar, which she identifies with her vision of herself as a double who is drawn to this place by a chain of events beyond her control. This could only be explained by the involuntary return of the repressed: “Something that ought to have been kept concealed but has nevertheless come to light.”³¹ To this psychoanalytical insight, which she senses should form the basis of her new novel, Nicole adds the ancient Jewish wisdom that the world is both revealed and concealed (a word that in Hebrew has the same root as world, *‘olam*). It strikes me that Krauss is sketching an identity in a psychic space, unmoored from a single time or place, and in this way navigates a path to a sense of being connected without being committed to the world, to a community, or to a family in a postmodernist reformulation of the internal exile of self.

The Tel Aviv Hilton gives Nicole no space in which to explore the revealing of the concealed, but traps her in its brutalist concrete jaws, forcing her into the usual ready-made comforting delusions. Yet, her writing resists the conventional forms which structure the narrative of her life and her

marriage. She instead attempts to hammer her novel into the postmodern formlessness which she believes is natural to all human life, fully aware that she is trying to tame the chaos of her life and that in her writing there is more artifice than art.³² Nicole believes that writing can engineer a self-invention in a multiverse. She is supported in this view by the Spinozian position (expounded in the novel by Friedman) that the biblical texts which defined Jewish history and identity were written by humans and not divinely inspired. Consequently, what binds her to the Jewish people is textual, created out of storytelling and mythmaking, and by implication neither religion nor land binds her. Yet she is not entirely free of covenantal bonds. In fact, her calling as a writer proves oppressive when her family or other Jews bind her like Isaac on the altar of national pride, which she likens to the constrictive way the Chinese are said to bind the feet of their babies, though not for the sake of beauty: "The need to make one's parents proud is deforming enough; the pressure to make one's whole people proud is something else again."³³ Nicole wishes to be unbound from the redemptive biblical and national narrative and hopes to achieve freedom through her writing by transcending her physical limitations.

This is one answer to the question I am posing in this book, and it is tested when Friedman invites her to ghostwrite a film script purportedly based on a lost play which Kafka left uncompleted. A bogus professor of literature who is possibly a Mossad agent (reminding us of Smileburger in Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*), Friedman persuades her that he has found the lost play in the papers Kafka left with Max Brod, which the National Library of Israel was then claiming for the Jewish people, a claim that raises the dispute over who owns a writer's legacy and what control a writer has over his or her work. That debate has long raged over the autonomy of the writer and of the individual, who resists belonging to a collective or a nation, but it also disputes Israel's right to claim custody of Jewish culture, which Judith Butler vigorously refuted, arguing for Kafka's "poetics of non-arrival."³⁴ Yet that is not the only sense in which a writer is not free. Whether Kafka is haunting Nicole or whether Nicole is ghosting Kafka, she cannot, like Zuckerman in *The Ghost Writer*, free herself of the literary influences which threaten her autonomy and agency as a writer.

Nicole tries to refuse Friedman's proposal, which would in effect take control over Kafka's uncompleted work but also over her. Yet, she is sucked in by Friedman's fantastic story that Kafka had a secret afterlife in the Land of Israel, where he lived incognito as a gardener. This is not an original idea,³⁵ and Kafka's Hebrew notebooks show his interest in the Land of Israel, where he dreamed of going and opening a restaurant, although nothing came of these dreams because within only a few years he died of tuberculosis on June 3, 1924. Philip Roth famously transplanted Kafka to New Jersey as a Hebrew teacher in *Zuckerman Bound*, and Krauss follows this metacritical ruse to discuss literary identity and literary heritage when she has Nicole abducted to a shack in the desert, which she believes was Kafka's

hut. She puts on a coat that she is convinced was once Kafka's, literally donning the mantle of the master. In fact, she enters the fantasy of his afterlife or *gilgul*, a kabalistic term for the transmigration of souls, which is also (in an overobvious attempt at symbolism) the name of Rabbi Klausner's institute for Kabbalistic Judaism in Safed. She lugs with her a mysterious suitcase that Friedman gave her, a synecdoche of the writer's legacy, which supposedly contains Kafka's manuscripts or (like the writing desk in *Great House*) might be empty. We cannot, it seems, know for certain how autonomous a writer can be when literature loads her with a complex legacy not of her choosing, a vexed question after the Holocaust, whose dead haunt contemporary writers along with the pantheon of a vanished Jewish culture. Krauss declared Kafka dead in *The History of Love* and here she resurrects not his ghost but a fantasy of his afterlife, which inhabits the writer in the very act of exorcising his literary presence. Yet Krauss is also countering Roth's "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting"; or, *Looking at Kafka*" by supposing that Kafka did escape Europe with Max Brod and fell out of time (as she wishes to do) to escape the Holocaust. This, however, turns her into the *gilgul* or metamorphosis of the great writer, or rather possessed by his *dybbuk*.³⁶

Exchanging loneliness for solitude, Nicole is caught up in Kafka's paradoxes and parables. She identifies with Kafka in his last years, as he lay between the sanitized sheets of one sanatorium after another, especially since she feels frustrated in her writing and her failed marriage, but she feels also, like Kafka, on the verge of happiness, on the threshold between Paradise and this world, in the paradox she borrows from Kafka, which concludes that we are "already there" in paradise, but unaware of it. Nicole realizes she is not beginning to write the novel she came to write in the Hilton, where she was conceived and where she expected to die. She shuns the Hebrew typewriter she finds in the deserted hut (another obvious hint at the alienated diaspora writer's ignorance or repudiation of Hebrew traditions) and, taking the bedstead outside, communes with the desert, having now escaped her claustrophobia and understood Kafka's spiritual sickness in her own body. She only recovers from the modern writer's painful disease, a psychosomatic illness that turns into a dangerous fever, in the emergency room of a Tel Aviv hospital. Having reached the threshold of another, sublime world, she no longer needs to write the novel. Friedman can be left to jump to his death from a balcony in the Hilton (a suicide scene that haunted her ever since she arrived and is now really happening). Now she is able to come to terms with her split self as well as with the traumatic past. She goes home to her children in Brooklyn, where she discovers herself sitting in the corner, "already there" all the time.

The now familiar phrase of Kafka's (to which I referred in the introduction) that he had nothing in common with himself, let alone with other Jews, seems to Nicole to sum up her own situation as a writer.³⁷ The writer's home is in America, but the novel concludes that she does not feel at home

anywhere, or more precisely she realizes in her cathartic metamorphosis in the desert that she is always *there* when she is *here*. This is the meaning, she believes, of the command God gave to Avram (not yet Abraham the patriarch) to leave his father's house and his native land, "to go out of himself so that he might make space for what God intended him to be."³⁸ That, the feverish Nicole decides in her own desert ordeal, is so much harder: to be outside one's body, in her visionary dissociation, to be always going *there*. It is to make space for what one might become in the future. It is also a rather different answer to the *hineni* in Foer's *Here I Am*, but both authors inevitably recall the introspective *hineni* of Bellow's Moshe Herzog in his reappraisal of his life of social climbing after the breakdown of his marriage. Both Abraham and Moses were answering a divine call to action, but these assimilated American Jews seem quite distant from that traditional faith and do not apparently feel the need to answer that inner call in any deep or significant affirmation of collective identity or spiritual response.³⁹

Krauss is projecting an anxiety that the Jews or Israel wish to hijack her, along with Kafka, to the canon of Jewish literature, to bind her to the yoke of collective national identity. As a fantasy, the unlikely possibility that the Israel Defense Forces would expend scarce resources on kidnapping American Jewish writers indicates the writer figure Nicole's paranoiac fear of being trapped into the category of a Jewish writer and held responsible to the Jewish people. To this supposition, Nicole reacts by arguing that Zionism does not own the Jewish writer, on the grounds that Zionism is predicated on the end of the diaspora and therefore the end of Jewish history,⁴⁰ a premise of post-Zionist discourse we visited in Chapter 5. What Nicole is in fact most trying to escape is a real existential anxiety after falling out of her marriage, unable to recognize the face of the man with whom she bore her children and whom she married for his constancy, only to discover her need to live in flux, in the freedom of packing a suitcase or a bag of clothes without a planned idea of where she might be going. She muses that she fell out of marriage just as she fell out of time. She recalls the Greek distinction between chronological time (*χρόνος*) and an indeterminate time (*καιρός*), when some opportune action can be taken.⁴¹ An indeterminate flux of time-space would surely be more suited to postmodernity than the structured linear narrative of marriage or for that matter Jewish history and commitment to Israel. Her need for security is paradoxically undone by her capricious aversion to anything that ties her down and plans her life, whether her reception as a "Jewish writer" or the conventional routine of marriage and daily life, from which she and Epstein, each in their own way, attempt to get away. This paradoxical predicament is shared by Zeruya Shalev's female lovers in *Love Life* and *Husband and Wife*, who shirk off control, whether patriarchal male domination or social conventions, yet who crave stability and structure. Like Ya'ara, Nicole only derives pleasure from sex when it is painful and violent: she recalls in graphic detail being tied up by her lover in Greece. Now she lets herself be taken for a ride (literally) by the older Friedman and

willingly lets male strangers take control. Yet, like Zeruya Shalev's restless women, she doesn't want to give up her autonomy. And thus she sets a trap for herself.

When sex loses its appeal, the marriage dies, as we see in *The Remains of Love*, where Avner and Shulamit long ago ceased to enjoy a loving relationship, or even that bourgeois ritual of sex which Dina compares to the uncorking of a champagne bottle. These unhappy couples are locked in the knots of mutual recriminations and admonitions that prevent them from communicating with each other or with their children. In *Forest Dark*, too, love has dried up between Nicole and her husband, although they each bestow excessive love on their children. They drift apart, not knowing how to deal with the situation of not loving each other. Awakening from the delusion of love is similar, Nicole thinks, to the loss of faith in cardinal beliefs; her need to believe explains why Nicole stubbornly listens to Friedman's proposal and accepts a delusion that runs contrary to the way things really are.

The characters in the novels of Krauss and Zeruya Shalev do not feel their bodies are at ease in the Land. They opt for a far less comforting view of estrangement and chaos revealed behind the myths and legends. Both writers read the Bible as a literary text and debunk familiar biblical narratives: an unlikely elderly David peeps at a modern Bathsheba in her bath in *Forest Dark* and rides to war against the Philistines in a movie set. In the biblical stories and in myths such as the Odyssey, which Nicole tells her children, she feels a binding power. Yet that power does not bind her to the Land or to a collective. Moreover, shedding belief in the afterlife forces us to think about the futility of a terminal mortality, of the limbotopia in which we are all stuck and which resists any futurity, whether it is the biblical promise of redemption of the Land or the Zionist yearning for a socialist utopia in the Land.⁴²

Dying Happily Ever After?

A sober and rationalistic conclusion when life is considered from its end informs Michael Chabon's *Moonglow* (2016). Ostensibly a fictional memoir of the narrator's grandfather as he lies dying, it looks back retrospectively to what remains of a life spent looking for trouble. What indeed remains of that erotic glow of the defining moment of sexual ecstasy when seen not as a peak but as a memory spot on a luckless trajectory of failures? The metafictional device of the fictional Chabon's memoir of his grandfather, of course, is a sleight of hand worthy of Philip Roth. What the narrator, Mike Chabon, imagines that his grandfather (who is never named) remembers or invents is anecdotal, filled with pseudo-documentary details which play fact against fiction and are constructed as intricately as the aviation models which Chabon's grandfather liked to construct. These models are clearly meant to mimic the narrative's similar obsession with constructing a

self-contained world. What brings together the defining moments of memory, if anything, is the irascible grandfather's incorrigible tendency to ask for trouble, to throw a kitten out the window to see what would happen, to get caught blowing up a bridge with a buddy in the army, or to vent his rage against the president of the company that fired him, an assault for which he is sent to prison, where he gets into more trouble.

As in other Jewish American stories of sexual initiation such as Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, Saul Bellow's "The Old System," or Hugh Nissenson's *My Own Ground*, the role of women is agentive and dominant: as a boy, the grandfather feels solidarity with the oppressed and is drawn to a hermaphrodite whore who exposes her genitals to him. However, the moment of falling in love is described as a rare moment of sincerity, even if it is contrived by a wager with his uncle Ray (an adulterous pool hustler) that he is about to find out what God planned for him and what his life has been leading up to. The moment comes when he meets the narrator's grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, at a synagogue done up as a casino for Purim, an occasion for masquerade and disguise. Yet that defining moment is treated with characteristic deflation when the young man asks to look into the young lady's eyes and she in return asks him to do something for her—to zip up his pants. Such comic subversion undoes any confidence we might have that the grandfather will become a committed communist or a successful lover. We never in fact find out the truth about anyone, as the grandfather puts it when puzzling over the grandfather's wife's "true self": "Maybe 'self' was a free variable with no bounded value."⁴³ This postmodern cliché prompts us to ask what, if anything, can be said about the grandfather's life and death, beyond the entertainment value of a trickster's telling of a tale about another trickster.

The answer may be that the glow of the moon in the title (alluded to playfully throughout the novel) is deceitful, that, as Wernher von Braun, the Nazi turned NASA rocket expert, reminds us in the novel's epigraph, the moon is entirely dark and the "dark side of the moon" (referring to the side that does not face the sun) is a popular misnomer. The inference is that our understanding of love and life is based on a misinformed but willing delusion. More than that, our understanding of life's meaning or meaninglessness depends on our irrational fantasies and myth-making that make sense of our survival. A prime example is the grandmother's haunting vision of a skinless horse with an enormous blood-red penis. The grandfather guesses this is linked somehow to the secret of her survival in the Holocaust, since the creature pursues her everywhere she goes, whispers her crimes and exposes the blackness of her soul. There is, he reasons, such a voice in everyone's head:

You could almost see the Skinless Horse as a clever adaptation, a strategy for survival evolved by a proven survivor. If you kept the voice inside your head, the way most people did, there could really be only one way to silence it. He admired the defiance, the refusal to surrender,

involuntary but implicit in the act of moving that reproachful whisper to a shadowy corner of a room, an iron furnace in a cellar, the branches of a grand old tree.”⁴⁴

Like Ian McEwan’s black dogs (in his 1992 novel of that title), this vision emerging from the Holocaust is the only way of conceptualizing absolute evil. The Skinless Horse, which we recognize as the *nuckelavee*, is one of the most terrifying demons of the Scottish Highlands (no wonder the grandmother develops a fascination with bagpipe music). This is not a meaningful life but survival of death, pursued by guilt and traumatic memories. When observing the moon through a telescope, the grandfather discovers that in her madness, the grandmother has set the hickory tree in the yard on fire, a blaze that turns his anger to wonder before it peters out. This insight into mental illness explores the human condition in the dark moonglow of irrationality (lunacy) that drives the psyche in the post-apocalyptic universal night, but it also explains the comic absurdity of everyday lives that are caught up in history but cannot control their fates.

The grandfather, with his “reptile-brain optimism,”⁴⁵ nevertheless never gives up his confidence that (in a frequent phrase of his) he can “work something out,” whether to mend his sick wife or to get himself out of trouble. As he lies dying, he realizes his story does not mean anything, that he wasted his life and never achieved anything. He bequeaths the story to the narrator so that he can find meaning in it.⁴⁶ There is a similar bequeathing of traumatic inheritance in Ayelet Waldman’s *Love and Treasure* when Natalie’s grandfather Jack leaves her a mysterious pendant for her to restore to its owners, except that she is not privy to the omniscient narration of the grandfather’s story in the first part of the novel. Here too the narrator does nothing to solve mysteries, but he only deepens moral ambiguities and distances truth.

The grandfather’s pursuit in *Moonglow* of von Braun after the liberation of Europe gives clues to a philosophical outlook on the human condition, but the issues of guilt and responsibility are never resolved. He is serving in a special operations unit in a clandestine program known from November 1945 as Operation Paperclip to recruit Nazi scientists and bring them to the United States to work on secret weapons to be used against the Soviet Union in the Cold War. One of these scientists was Wernher von Braun, who directed the Peenemunde Army Research Center that developed the devastating V2 rocket. Like Conrad’s Marlow on the track of Kurtz, the grandfather discovers the greater horror at Nordhausen, where the Nazis produced the V2 rockets in underground facilities using slave labor from the Mittelbau-Dora camps. On first seeing a V2 rocket, he feels awe at its power, not so much to kill large numbers of people (which it did not do too efficiently or accurately), but its sheer ability to defy gravity, to pull away from the earth and to exceed terrestrial boundaries. But then, wonder at human achievement gives way to anger and the urge to kill von Braun, which would

have messed up American plans to cover up the secret V2 program and deploy its scientists in building missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads against the Soviets and later in implementing the US space program. The narrator sums up his disillusion:

...once your dream revealed itself, like most dreams, to be nothing but a current of raw compulsion flowing through a circuitry of delusion and lies, then that was the time to give it up. That was the time to damn your dream and trust your eyes. And maybe cock your revolver.⁴⁷

A rationalist appraisal of the world after such knowledge cannot sustain idealism. Von Braun, we are assured, must have known the calculated cruelty with which thousands of camp inmates were exploited and worked to death; the narrator surmises that he was no doubt involved in the selection of eligible prisoners for tasks requiring aptitude. America's own moral complicity in the cover-up dampens the thrill of the first moon landing and lends von Braun's epigraph ironic meaning. Nevertheless, the grandfather evinces pity for the aged von Braun when he spies on him urinating with effort and pain at a space exploration conference. Yet, despite his secret knowledge, the grandfather cannot resist the thrill of the first satellite (a Soviet Sputnik) or the excitement of building rockets himself. But he cannot bring himself to watch the moon landing, the source of pride for American Jewish immigrants in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*. He knows too much.

However, these perspectives on history themselves prove false or delusive. After his wife's death, the grandfather finds comfort in the gravitational pull of the widowed Sally's vagina, needing to have something to hold onto that would nourish and feed him. Twice in the novel he has his pants zipped up by a woman, and he does not seem to emerge from an infantile oral stage. Nevertheless, he is imagined as Jacob wrestling with the angel,⁴⁸ using his wits to outsmart the Americans and the Germans, beating the Russians in the nick of time to a treasure trove of secret documents detailing the V2 plans, but in doing so, he misses the glory of capturing von Braun, who surrenders far away, in the Austrian Tyrol. History is not averted, and the grandfather remains an anonymous intelligence officer who gifts his testimony to the narrator. The analogy of his role in history is with the falling rocket launcher that put the Sputnik into orbit, which, significantly, he observes from a prison roof, "a prisoner of gravity like everything else in the universe" that would "burn up and break up, and leave nothing but vapor and a memory."⁴⁹ Such awareness of the transitory frailty of mortals undermines further the possibility of finding meaning in the universe. In his exposition of a postmodern understanding of history, Chabon evokes the Angel of History facing the storm in Paradise in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," a vision I mentioned in Chapter 5. Yet, history in Chabon's novel reads like a personal scrapbook of hearsay and trivia, including excerpts from Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), itself

a fictional account of the V2 project based on real events and documents mixed with sexual fantasies and occult speculations. If in Pynchon's version the V2 is drawn by gravity when its engine cuts out and it plunges lethally to its target, in Chabon's novel its arc forms a destructive arrow which puts an end to the convent that shelters the grandmother and sends her on a journey of deception and lies until she meets the narrator's grandfather. This trajectory leads to the revelation of her identity, and the narrator must face the fact that his biological ancestor was a Nazi. Toward the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the narrator has been complicit in the deception worked on the reader and that he has carefully planned the explosion of any certainty about his identity, beginning with the *objet trouvé* of an advert for Chabon's rockets. Again, fiction serves to undo rather than tell the truth. The narrator leaves us with this secret Nazi paternity that was unknown to his grandfather, who is ostensibly the subject of the memoir and who, the narrator tells us, was happier not knowing the truth. In the end, in the blank at the end of life, in the pain of suffering between this world and the next, there are only stories to fill the emptiness of life's meaning when the moon turns out to be only a dream of a peaceful family refuge in one of the grandfather's miniature models.

If the legacy left to the postwar generation in *Moonglow* is loss and grieving, Ofir Touché Gafra's acclaimed first novel, *Olam hasof* (2004; *The World of the End*, 2013), begins where Chabon's novel ends, with death and the story of love on the other shore, in the afterlife. As in Nevo's *Neuland*, Gafra engages with the postmodern abolition of futurity by imagining an alternative world of possibilities in a timeless escape from history. Yet this reaction to post-Zionist despair does not create a viable utopia.⁵⁰ Ben Mendelsohn has lost his wife Marian in a bizarre accident, but their perfect childlike love does not end. To celebrate her posthumous 40th birthday, Ben invites his friends to see a spectacular firework display. Together with the explosion of the fireworks, Ben fires his gun and departs to seek Marian in the next world. The Other World turns out to be a nudist utopia where all needs are satisfied, run on altruistic principles that do not require the use of money and that abandons the linear chronology of time and history. Yet, finding Marian is not so easy, and Ben hires an ace detective nicknamed Mad Hop to assist him. In fact, the reality of the Other World dispels any idealism that love is forever. Indeed, love lasts "till death do us part," and other romantic possibilities arise in the afterlife, as when Ben's father takes up with a Norwegian fellow-passenger on his plane that crashed. This postmortal liaison does not stop him wooing his wife, who puts his obtrusiveness down to male possessiveness. Ben's mother is quite happy leading a single afterlife: "Love? Who says it needs to be shared? [...] I recognize that life is just the prologue, the introduction to the real thing. [...] I've never felt as alive as in death."⁵¹ However, lovers are haunted by their rapist or their murderer, and themselves pursue dreams of lost love, as Keren does when she meets Ben. Loss and abandonment, apparently, do not come to an end with death.

True to the intertextuality and hypermediation common in postmodern fiction, the Other World resembles a movie set, and Ben bumps into Marilyn Monroe. Orson Welles is still making movies and Shakespeare is writing a new play. There is not much difference from this world, where romantic love depends on fantasy role-playing, for example, when Yonatan and his French virtual partner act out the divine lovers in Rushdie's *The Ground under her Feet*. There is a persistent run of allusions to Rushdie novels, and at one point a reenactment of Ionesco's absurdist play *What Shall We Do with the Body?* In both worlds, life and fiction are mixed up and people act out their fantasies of love and happiness endlessly. The afterlife, however, opens endless permutations of the end of both the story and life. Ben worked in his previous life as an "epilogist," ghostwriting story endings (like Jacob in Foner's *Here I Am*, he is a writer or "righter," as he puts it, of imagined alternate lives, which are virtual realities). Yet, he cannot accept that his suicide (the ending he wrote for his own life) is a "complete travesty"⁵² and that Marian might not reciprocate his eternal devotion but possibly has returned to life to continue her romantic adventures. Ben thinks only one ending to his story of perfect love is possible, the one he wrote, and any other is unacceptable. The truth is that when Ben does meet Marian in a mental institution, she is suffering from Post-Mortal Depression and believes their reunion is a dream. Normality, as any Israeli living through constant terror attacks knows, is a relative term that divides the real and the imagined, the dream and the irrevocable ending, which can never be known even after death. The world "of the end" in the novel's title, however, discounts the eschatological ending of redemptive narratives and proposes a more subtle and ironic end, in which there are no endings.

The protagonists of Chabon's and Gafra's novels share a morbid assessment of love and life. In *Moonglow* people shoot at each other with guns or bows and arrows, and one woman thrusts a pitchfork into her lover's leg. *The World of the End* is no more optimistic about the human condition and is filled with homicides (or attempted homicides) and suicides, not to mention sudden road accidents and strokes. The delusion of romantic love in this world stubbornly remains a fundamental belief, the one pursuit of happiness worth dying for in the face of the nothingness which stands in for the meaning of life. For example, Yonatan and his French virtual partner meet only to be parted when Yonatan suffers a heart attack, and this other Marian (the name of Robin Hood's lover) is herself murdered. The protagonists of Gafra's novel never find out the reason for death, apart from suggestions of some malicious vandalism in genealogical trees, which are tended by an other-worldly Forestry Commission looking out for broken branches, defects, and excess sap. The people who inhabit the Other World are very much wrapped up in their own thoughts and dreams and do not seek the answers. Mad Hop tells Ben that he will never know the truth and he must stop asking. In neither Chabon's nor Gafra's novel is there any hope of redemption or of certain knowledge. The sole consolation is that eternal

sleep is available at the press of a button in *The World of the End*, which dispatches the dead each to his or her own world of their dreams (a play on the Hebrew expression used when someone dies, *halakh le'olamo*, literally went to their world). Hence the multilevel meaning of the novel's title, the world of the end.

The science fiction fantasy of *The World of the End* emerges from a genre amenable to imagining the posthumous post-human in a zombie limbotopia. It allows for human agency that has limited range and effect so that (as in *Moonglow*) humans cannot rid themselves of the delusions that rule their lives. When Konalsky, the comatose painter, is permitted to return to his wife Bessie seconds before Ann, the Angel of Death nurse, pulls the switch on his life-support system, the message he brings back—that there is life after death—is misinterpreted. Mortals therefore do not know if there is a life after death and are left to decide their own fates in ignorance of what awaits them. Krauss's and Chabon's protagonists are no wiser and can only fumble in the dark for clues to the meaning of their solitude on this planet. In all these texts, the individual stands alone in the urban jungle, disconnected from any collective or religious faith. And if there is an afterlife, Gafila suggests, there is no way of preparing for it. Shooting oneself in the head is risky because we do not know what awaits us and when we get there, we do not know what is real or a dream. Ben vainly thought he could write the ending of his own story, yet paradoxically, as in many postmodern novels, the open ending (or unending) is the ending written for him in a confusing merging of the real and the surreal, of overlapping imaginary worlds, of postmodern simulacra. For Gafila, the loss of loved ones leaves a void that cries out for comfort. As Beth Kissileff comments on Gafila's novel, the British philosopher Roger Scruton once said, "The consolation of imaginary things is not imaginary consolation."⁵³ That willful self-delusion gives a degree of solace only if one looks no further than the materiality of physical sensations. Schopenhauer, for one, was convinced that it all boils down to materiality.

Nothing changes, particularly unfulfilled love relationships. In the afterlife of suicides in Etgar Keret's *Hakaytanah shel kneler* (1998; *Kneller's Happy Campers*, 2009), the afterlife resembles a very ordinary and unsightly Tel Aviv, a place that undermines any ideological construction of the first Zionist city.⁵⁴ By contrast, in Dara Horn's *The World to Come* (2006), the afterlife is variously posited as the future in this life, a promise of redemption, or the existence among us of immortal artists and writers or loved ones: "It is a great injustice that those who die are often people we know, while those who are born are people we don't know at all."⁵⁵

The eternal life imagined in Horn's novel *Eternal Life* (2018), however, stretches out in an endless cycle of regrets and compulsive behavior patterns in the story of Rachel, who is condemned to live from the Destruction of the Temple in Roman-occupied Jerusalem to the twenty-first century. On the way, this Eternal Jewess is stalked by Elazar, a man who tries persistently to persuade her they are the perfect match, but who is manipulative and

cruel. Horn suggests that no free-thinking person can resist the zest for living life to the full, for falling in love; yet this postmodern view in her novel acknowledges that love is a sadomasochistic trap in an unending cycle of loss and sorrow, despite the enduring hope of new life in a newborn child. Rachel declares that the world is godless after the destruction of the Temple, for there could be no atonement without sacrifice, which sounds like a post-Holocaust existentialist despair in a Sartrean “no exit.” She objects to her son Yokhanan ben Zakkai’s decision to ask for Yavneh so that the story of the Jewish people could go on, but she gives up death to enable her son to live, in effect enabling the continuity of Judaism at Yavneh. However, in the age of the new priests of genetics, who decide the fate of each person through their scientific instruments (postmodern *urim vetumim*), Rachel decides that mortality is a precious gift.

We are back after destruction at “Yavneh,” which I have shown to be a major trope for contemporary Jewish culture, and, for all the subversion of canonical texts, the postmodern Jewish imagination is incessantly reinventing them, as Ruby Namdar does in his novel *The Ruined House*, when he builds the pages of the Talmudic text into his text and intertext, creating an eternal repetition of key narratives of destruction from the Temple in Jerusalem to 9/11, but also giving them new meaning in the aging body of his protagonist, who, like Horn’s Wandering Jewess in *Eternal Life*, relives Jewish history and comes back to ancient perspectives on love and sex that attempt to repair the world. Now that I have shown in this book how love for a woman and love for the Land in the plot of the postmodern novel empty out into desire without wish or possibility of fulfillment, it is now time finally to ask how we could move on to repair of the world while resolving the conundrum of individual choice and the apparently random events of history.

Notes

- 1 Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 7–10.
- 2 Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*, 233.
- 3 See Aviezer Ravitzky, “A Land Adored Yet Feared: The Land of Israel in Jewish Tradition,” in *Homelands and Diasporas: Greeks, Jews and Their Migrations*, ed. Minna Rozen (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 183–85.
- 4 Zeruya Shalev, *Shearit hekhayim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2011), 53; *The Remains of Love*, trans. Philip Simpson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 60.
- 5 Shalev, *Shearit hekhayim*, 7; *The Remains of Love*, 2.
- 6 Shalev, *Shearit hekhayim*, 144; *The Remains of Love*, 176. The Hebrew reads less explicitly: “*beshearit yoma, beshearit khayeha*” (in the remains of her day, in the remains of her life).
- 7 Ravitzky, “A Land Adored Yet Feared,” 183–210.
- 8 On the ambiguities of images of love and sex in Hebrew poetry about the Land, see Assaf Inbari, “Forever Engaged, Never Married, to the Land of Israel,” *Azure* (Summer 2007): 55–62.
- 9 On the implications of the gendering of the personified lake in Hebrew as masculine, see Joseph Lowin, *Art and the Artist in the Contemporary Israeli Novel*

- (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 158–59; 161n9. Lowin compares Alphonse de Lamartine’s 1832 poem “Le lac” (161n11), but it seems to me Shalev has subverted any romantic idea of love enduring after death.
- 10 Compare the land-body trope in Castel-Bloom’s *Dolly City*, pp. 65–66 above. In *Khalakim enoshiim* (2002; *Human Parts*, 2003), Castel-Bloom transforms the body/land allegory into a weather forecast for the nation after the collapse of the peace process, showing the disconnect between land and people. In another example, Michal Govrin applies a sacrilegious mysticism in *Snapshots* to the erotic description of the Gikhon spring that gushes up under the Temple.
 - 11 Inbari, “Forever Engaged, Never Married, to the Land of Israel,” 42–64.
 - 12 Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 201–03.
 - 13 Neumann, *Land and Desire in Early Zionism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 2–3, 16–19, 52–53. On the eroticization of the body in early Zionism, see David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 176–203; Ofer Nordheimer Nur, *Eros and Tragedy: Jewish Male Fantasies and the Masculine Revolution of Zionism* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014).
 - 14 Yakir Englander and Avi Sagi, *Sexuality and the Body in the New Religious-Zionist Discourse*, trans. Batya Stein (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 223. See Yehodaya Amir, “Erets, tev’a veadam: hehishtrashut benofah shel erets-yisrael ‘al pi mishnato shel Aharon David Gordon” (“Land, Nature and Man: Putting Down Roots in the Landscape of the Land of Israel in the Teachings of A. D. Gordon”), in *Erets-yisrael bahagut hayehudit bemeah ha’esrim (The Land of Israel According to the Jewish thought of A. D. Gordon)*, ed. Avi’ezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2004), 315–45. See also Neumann, *Land and Desire in Early Zionism*, 60–62, 68–69.
 - 15 Quoted in Englander and Sagi, *Sexuality and the Body in the New Religious-Zionist Discourse*, 223.
 - 16 See Michael Gluzman, *Haguf hatsioni: leumiyut, migdar, veminiut besifrut ha’ivrit hekhdashah (The Zionist Body: Nationalism, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature)* (Tel Aviv: Hakibuts hameukhad, 2007).
 - 17 *Lights on Orot—The Teachings of HaRav Avraham HaCohen Kook: Eretz Yisrael*, ed. David Samson and Tzvi Fishman (Jerusalem: Torat Eretz Yisrael Publications, 5756 [1996]), 101.
 - 18 Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot* (Bet-El: Hava Books, 1993), 9–13; *Orot*, trans. Bezalel Naor (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), 89–95.
 - 19 Kook, *Orot*, 80–81; *Orot*, trans. Naor, 189–90. See Englander and Sagi, *Sexuality and the Body in the New Religious-Zionist Discourse*, 223–24. On Rabbi Kook’s fusion of utopian messianism with political Zionism, see David Ohana, *Nationalizing Judaism: Zionism as a Theological Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 110–11. On the competing religious and secular narratives of love of the Land, see S. Ilan Troen, “Israeli Views of the Land of Israel/Palestine,” *Israel Studies* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 100–14. For a philosophical overview of the Land of Israel in discourse of exile and redemption, see Avi Sagi, *Reflections on Identity: The Jewish Case* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 136–71.
 - 20 Chafetz Chaim, “Parshas Bo,” *Chafetz Chaim on the Torah*, ed. Shmuel Greineman, trans. Gershon Robinson (Lakewood, NJ: Israel Bookshop Publications, 2012), vol. 1, 211–12.
 - 21 Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 214–37. For a critique of Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and other leading Israeli writers of the generation of 1948 for ignoring the cultural and spiritual revival of Israel and abandoning the Zionist notion of Israel as the national home of the Jewish people, see Hillel Weiss, *‘Alila: sifrut hakilayon hayisraelit* (Bet-El: Sifriyat Bet-El, 1992). The title of Weiss’s collection of critical essays can mean “The Plot” or “The Libel” of the Israeli Literature of Shame.

- 22 For examples of this view, see Rachel F. Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2003), 74–77.
- 23 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 319.
- 24 Eshkol Nevo, *Neuland* (Or Yehuda: Zemora-Bitan, 2011), 176 (Hebrew); *Neuland* (London: Vintage, 2014), 191 (English).
- 25 Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Henry Longfellow (New York: Random House, 2003), 3.
- 26 Martin Buber, *The Way of Man, According to the Teaching of Hasidism* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1966), 8–10.
- 27 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 136–37.
- 28 Lederhendler, “Israel and America in Jewish American Writing,” 63.
- 29 Nicole Krauss, *Forest Dark* (New York: Harper, 2017), 163.
- 30 Krauss, *Forest Dark*, 127. Emphasis in the original.
- 31 Krauss, *Forest Dark*, 69. Emphasis in the original. At another level, the uncanny has been applied to the pattern of repetitive catastrophe in Jewish history which functions as a revenant in the collective unconscious; see Howard F. Stein, “The Holocaust, the Uncanny, and the Jewish Sense of History,” *Political Psychology* 5, no. 1 (March 1984): 5–35.
- 32 Krauss, *Forest Dark*, 138.
- 33 Krauss, *Forest Dark*, 75.
- 34 Judith Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?” *London Review of Books* 33, no. 5 (March 3, 2011): 3–8. See Liska, *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife*, 153. The papers were restituted to the National Library of Israel in December 2016 by order of the Israeli Supreme Court. Their contents were not known to the public at the time of publication of the novel, which allows Krauss to indulge in the fantasy of Kafka’s unfinished manuscript. However, there is no such uncompleted manuscript as Krauss fantasizes, though there was a suitcase of manuscripts, which Max Brod brought with him to Israel when he fled the Nazis, and some of Kafka’s papers were kept in a disused fridge in Esther Hoffe’s cat-infested apartment in Tel Aviv, similar to the description in the novel, but Krauss’s account is almost entirely counter-factual. For a dramatic account of the ethical and legal intricacies of the long fight over Kafka’s papers, see Benjamin Balint, *Kafka’s Last Trial: The Case of a Literary Legacy* (New York: Norton, 2018). There have been similar controversies over restitution of stolen Holocaust art, and Ayelet Waldman has made much of suspect motives and unscrupulous dealings in what she terms “Holocaust recovery” in her novel *Love and Treasure*, in which she questions by implication Israel’s moral right to guardianship of lost or stolen Jewish property. Her novel is partly based on the account of the failed restitution of Hungarian Jewish property in Ronald W. Zweig, *The Gold Train: The Destruction of the Jews and the Second World War’s Most Terrible Robbery* (London: Allen Lane, 2002).
- 35 See, for example, Iris Bruce’s account of Kafka’s successful immigration and afterlife as an Israeli Nobel prizewinner, “What If Kafka Had Immigrated to Palestine?” in *What Ifs of Jewish History from Abraham to Zionism*, ed. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 187–214.
- 36 For a discussion of Krauss’s intertextual use of Kafka, see Kirstin Gwyer, “‘You Think Your Writing Belongs to You?’: Intertextuality in Contemporary Jewish Post-Holocaust Literature,” *Humanities* 7, no. 20 (2018); <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7010020>.
- 37 Krauss, *Forest Dark*, 125.
- 38 Krauss, *Forest Dark*, 164–65.

- 39 On Moshe Herzog, see Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 113–20.
- 40 Krauss, *Forest Dark*, 270.
- 41 Krauss, *Forest Dark*, 258–59.
- 42 See Vered Karti Shemtov, “A Sense of No Ending, Part 2: Etgar Keret and the Changing Concept of Time in Contemporary Hebrew Literature,” *Dibur Literary Journal* 6 (Fall 2018): 57–64.
- 43 Michael Chabon, *Moonglow* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 96.
- 44 Chabon, *Moonglow*, 84.
- 45 Chabon, *Moonglow*, 199.
- 46 Chabon, *Moonglow*, 240–41.
- 47 Chabon, *Moonglow*, 255. I believe Jon Doyle is mistaken in seeing here an “enraptured patriotism” for World War Two (“The Changing Face of Post-Postmodern Fiction,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59, no. 3 (2018): 264).
- 48 Chabon, *Moonglow*, 423.
- 49 Chabon, *Moonglow*, 308.
- 50 See Oded Nir, “Israeli Literature and the Time of ‘post-post-Zionism,’” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2019); <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss2/10/>.
- 51 Ofir Touché Gafra, *The World of the End*, trans. Mitch Ginsburg (New York: Tom Doherty, 2013), 146–47; *Olam hasof* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2004), 174.
- 52 *The World of the End*, 258; *Olam hasof*, 310.
- 53 Quoted in Beth Kissileff, “The Afterworldly Imagination of Ofir Touché Gafra,” *The Tower* 11 (February 2014); <http://www.thetower.org/article/the-afterworldly-imagination-of-ofir-touche-gafra/>; accessed December 14, 2018.
- 54 Karen Grumberg, *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 3.
- 55 Dara Horn, *The World To Come* (New York: Norton, 2006), 283. For a close reading of Horn’s novel, see Sandor Goodhart, “The ‘Story without an Ending’: Art, Midrash, and History in Dara Horn’s *The World to Come*,” in *New Directions in Jewish American and Holocaust Literatures: Reading and Teaching*, ed. Victoria Aarons and Holli Levitsky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 119–38.

Coda

One critic has noticed the almost obsessive self-centered preoccupation with sexual pleasure in Michael Chabon's inventive and counter-factual tales of losers and hucksters:

What really matters to Chabon is not sexual identity but self-discovery through sexual experimentation. He shares the common opinion of the literary intelligentsia that the sexual act is a peak experience, the peak of peaks; and not only that, but is also potentially the defining moment of a person's life.¹

We have seen in the previous chapter that, viewed retrospectively, sex does not seem to have yielded much self-discovery beyond the awareness of the delusions which make us carry on with our false beliefs. Postmodern love does not rule out mutual intimacy and bonding, but places existential conditions on a love relationship. Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978), declared, "The lover's fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits."² Alain Badiou, in *In Praise of Love* (2009), tried to resolve the absolute individualism of postmodernity with commitment to the Other: "[...] my love's main enemy, the one I must defeat, is not the other, it is myself, the 'myself' that prefers identity to difference, that prefers to impose its world against the world re-constructed through the filter of difference."³ And Octavio Paz offers the paradox, "Love is an attempt to penetrate another being, but it can only be realized if the surrender is mutual."⁴ In this Coda, I wish to see if we can move forward and test possibilities of love that would find room for human liberty in a chaotic world and allow for futurity.

The Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman reminds us that the boundaries between love and sex in social discourse are blurred and contested, and that, though love tests the limit-case definition of the human, more often it is manipulated into cultural constructions which separate biological reproduction from pleasure. The resulting excess of desire is released in eroticism that gives surplus value to the sex act over and above its reproductive function.⁵ Postmodern understanding of the erotic, Bauman informs us, marks a breakthrough in emancipating sex from both reproduction and love.

Given the self-sufficiency of eroticism, the object of desire is desire. This has become a cultural norm, freed from moral or personal responsibility and subject only to market forces and human exploitation. Detached from biological reproduction, sex is no longer a guarantee of immortality in the continuity of the human species. The sexual revolution, Bauman maintains, privileged the gratification of the moment, flattening postmodern time. Love is no longer innocent, for everything has been sexualized. And because the erotic signifier is free ranging, individual identity is not target-oriented to create the essence of the social being, but floats, experimenting with flexible forms of gender and sexuality.⁶ Sociologist Eva Illouz has concluded that:

emotional uncertainty in the realm of love, romance, and sex is the sociological effect of the ways in which the consumer market, therapeutic industry, and the Internet have been assembled and embedded in the ideology of the individual choice that has become the main frame for organizing personal freedom.⁷

Illouz unhitches this uncertainty from conflicts in the subconscious and attributes it to global forces of the market economy and the promotion of individual privacy and autonomy (not least by novelists) in a consumer culture. It follows that sexual freedom may be liberating, but it gives rise to unease instead of the bonds of intimacy, let alone contractual relationships.⁸

Sexual norms have been deregulated, yet from time immemorial they have been instruments of social control and power relations. Michel Foucault, in his introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, addresses the myth of sexual repression and concludes that the discourse of sexuality links power relations and sexual pleasure in the will to knowledge, making us feel guilty but also promising liberation.⁹ The discourse of sexuality thus constructs power relations in a social setting. As sociologist of sexuality William Simon argues in *Postmodern Sexualities* (1996), the broadening of sexual variations in the *Kinsey Report* and Masters and Johnson's clinical investigation of orgasm contributed to a normalization of sexuality which subordinated experience to discourse. At the same time, postmodernism opens up the possibilities of human knowledge and social behavior that enable a resistance to fixed linear concepts of progress and renew non-paradigmatic thinking about the plurality of sexual identities.¹⁰

Freud called those who did not want their primal instincts to be regulated by society the "discontents" of civilization. Zygmunt Bauman (writing 65 years later) located the "discontents" of postmodernity in those who had difficulty with the universal demand for the freedom of the individual when "the pleasure principle is the presiding judge."¹¹ The pursuit of happiness is the name of the game, and for it, Bauman believes, personal security has been sacrificed.¹² What Bauman says about kinship networks in *Liquid Love* (2003) reflects his despair at the collapse of the nuclear family (in contradiction of politically correct thinking): "boundaries [of kinship networks]

are blurred and disputed, they dissolve in a terrain with no clear-cut property titles and hereditary tenures—a frontier-land, sometimes a battlefield, at other times an object of court battles that are no less bitter.”¹³ Bauman does not supply empirical evidence, but presents a truism that pre-industrial society was organized in a hierarchy of families and communities which offered support and wielded authority; when all hierarchies are questioned, there is little support for the individual and little to sustain national or collective traditions and identities.

The postmodern discontents of civilization are unhappy with their marriages and with marriage as such. Already in nineteenth-century bourgeois materialism and industrial capitalism, the prioritizing of the libido in romantic love ran counter to the financial or social incentives in bourgeois marriage that encouraged successful unions and social integration. One of the most innovative thinkers to emerge from Religious Zionism, Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (1949–2007; known by his acronym Shagar) criticized romantic concepts of love for constructing unfulfillable fantasies out of American movies and responded that Judaism rejects Freud’s insistence on sex as the primal instinct which rules our lives. Instead, it presents marriage as a means to harness the erotic forces necessary for procreation in an act of *tikkun* (cosmic repair).¹⁴ The exclusive goal of intimacy does not build stable marriages or happy families because romance conflicts with the principle of *tikkun*, which requires annulment of self and control of the libido.¹⁵ Whereas, argues Shagar, romantic love, in its search for an end to loneliness, perpetuates solitude in intimacy, the only way coitus can be raised from its functional performance as a goal in itself is for the couple to have a common cause outside themselves, what Slavoj Žižek calls, in his critique of Christianity, “a third point (the Cause for which both are fighting, to which both are committed).”¹⁶

One common extrinsic cause is to perpetuate the family or community after death. The conclusion of Chabon’s fictional memoir and the working thesis of Gafra’s fantasy discussed in the previous chapter describe a deluded wish to believe there is an afterlife. Tova Reich’s derision in *Mother India* of moral reckoning in Jewish accounts of the afterlife similarly leaves no exit from the limbotopia of mortality. The resurrection of the dead is a cardinal belief in rabbinical Judaism, yet there is little detail in Jewish sources of what the world to come is really like. Certainly, postmortem matrimony was enshrined in Levirate marriage, which ensured the afterlife of a brother who died without children, but there is no hint of carnal relations in the next world as in Greek and Roman myths. Indeed, the Talmudic sages abhorred Herod’s necrophiliac attempt to continue his relationship with his wife Miriam after her death, but they told a number of tales illustrating the endurance of marital love beyond death.¹⁷ Instead of promises for the afterlife, Judaism teaches moral conduct and small acts of kindness in the here-and-now, the quiet unspoken compassion for others, in preparation of the soul for the world to come, which is the world of truth: “The cry for a life beyond

the grave,” in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, “is presumptuous if it is not accompanied by a cry for eternal life prior to death.”¹⁸

The fundamental solitude of the human individual we see in examples of postmodern love in the work of contemporary Jewish writers contrasts with the traditional Jewish ideal of love as the union of the two halves of humanity which sanctifies the body in communion with both God and the other gender, a union indivisible from building the nation and future generations in the covenantal bond; in the Bible, the childless Sarah told Abraham that she will be *built* through Hagar. When the rabbis in Ethics of the Fathers warned that only altruistic love will endure, we discern a different understanding of human relations from Western concepts of love as an objective in itself and of amorous passion as an absolute of human experience (though the Greeks frowned on it—Plato thought it a delirium).¹⁹ Judaism stands out as exceptional amid the general acceptance of pre- and extra-marital, non-reproductive casual sex after the gradual loosening of all social controls.

Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, for many years the leading authority of Modern Orthodox Judaism in America and an intellectual benchmark for many American Jews, did not agree that eros was incompatible with marriage, but saw in sexuality a stage in the redeeming process that could transform sex from an I-it to an I-you relationship, when the individual flees solitude and shares carnal knowledge (just as Adam *knew* Eve in Genesis). The elevation of the act of reproduction to a spiritual union, to an act of purification through mutual pleasure, connects marital relations to the covenantal bond of the Jewish people and God: “The union between Adam and Eve is an experiential one. They established a community of destiny, of feelings, of emotional vibrations—a union of two lonely hearts which beat with the same rhythm.”²⁰ In this view, the Jewish people were called into existence by a covenantal bond, which nevertheless leaves individual liberty intact.²¹ Soloveitchik, in his influential essay “Kol dodi dofek” (“The voice of my lover is knocking”), makes a conceptual distinction between the covenants of *goral* (fate) and *yi’ud* (destiny) in the life of the Jewish nation, a distinction that foregrounds the individual’s free-willed responsibility to the collective and to Jewish history. The lover’s knocking at the door in Song of Songs is here a divine call of redemption for Israel to answer at specific moments of history, in contrast to the yearning without answer we saw in postmodern novels.²²

Desire, Leon Ebreo explained in *Dialogues of Love*, is just as real as love itself:

PHILO: If love is only for things that exist, why can’t desire also be?

SOPHIA: Because, just as love presupposes the existence of things, desire presupposes their absence.²³

Yearning for the loved one, the exiled Divine Presence of God, as Rabbi Nahman of Breslav expressed it in his story “The Heart and the Well-Spring,”

intensifies love, becomes love itself.²⁴ Shagar compares such longing to the impediments to consummation of desire, which in Freudian terms heighten libido, just as waiting for a woman to complete her menstrual cycle enhances pleasure.²⁵ That yearning (contrary to what we saw in previous chapters) can be viewed as a reconciliation of universalism and nationalism. Exile is not a natural state in this scheme, as in postcolonialist thinking, but a process of redemption that works from dispersal to unity in the common bond of the Jewish people with their land, to which they yearn as a point of origin but also as the realization of their universal mission, symbolized in the Sukkot festival when all the nations will come to Jerusalem.²⁶ The yearning for the Messiah is more than just a trope for love relationships in the novels of Agnon and *rabanit* Elon; it is an understanding of the process of redemption, which is not cancelled out by the Messiah not having come—the Messiah has simply not come *yet*.

Postmodernity offers choice, choice of gender, identity, sexual orientation, and more. In Judith Butler's thinking, for example, gender is performative and has no prior stable identity; this is not to deny that subjecthood can have agency, but it posits subjecthood as precarious and provisional.²⁷ We have come a long way from Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Judaism, however, offers choice not as a push button selection in a commodity culture, but the covenantal connection of self to a community of individuals bound by mutual ethical responsibility and altruistic love (*ahavat khinam*). By contrast, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud deemed the biblical command to love one's neighbor as oneself an unrealistic demand of the cultural superego that was ridiculous and impossible to perform. In this respect, the contemporary Israeli educator Rabbi Hayim Navon has challenged what he considers the fallacies of postmodernism, beginning with the common assumption in human rights discourse of an individual's absolute freedom. For Navon, a world with no boundaries or borders, without either hell or heaven, as John Lennon put it in "Imagine," is frighteningly empty of value-related identity or spiritual foundation, devoid of viable trusting relationships between individuals or between them and the collective. In such a universe, Navon writes, Oedipus and Antigone have no existence.²⁸

The dissolution of a monolithic truth accords with the Jewish recognition that the world around us is full of deceit and illusions, and that there may be different perspectives of reality, including 70 interpretations of the Torah. Uncertainty in Judaism is a necessary good, not a necessary evil. Our inability to know reality in its entirety ought to humble us before Divine omniscience rather than make us despair at our inability to know the whole truth about everything. Unlike the cynical nihilism of "hard" postmodernism, Shagar argued that in "soft" postmodernism randomness does not mean arbitrariness and it accepts that no one point in the infinity of the universe can carry absolute value. Postmodern ideas about truth and justice, Shagar believed, might actually accord with Hasidic interpretations of the kabbalistic notion of *tsimtsum*, the doctrine of Divine contraction in the act of creation, to which

Krauss refers in her novel *Forest Dark*. Indeed, one could say that only without self-deception, without deluded belief in absolutes, can an ethical self evolve.²⁹ The freedom to choose, as Yaron-Dayan's Alma discovers, does not grant the liberty to act autonomously or ethically. But then the materialist freedoms of late-capitalist postmodernity guarantee neither personal liberty nor agency and leave only the conscious delusion that we can control our destiny. Unlike postmodern insistence on the rights of the individual, Judaism speaks of duties to the collective, to humanity; where postmodernity blurs boundaries, Judaism calls for moral differentiation.

What Judaism offers is a belief system based on collective identity and faith in a common destiny based on mutual responsibility (*kol yisrael 'aravim zeh lezeh*). The loss of belief in Zionist ideology, however, has left a multiplicity of identities and non-identities for many Jews lacking roots in Judaism or Jewish history. Moreover, the kibbutz experiment, to judge by Zeruya Shalev's *Remains of Love*, often failed to foster loving relationships or provide its children with the emotional and coping skills which they needed in adult relationships. On the contrary, the paternalistic organization of communal life left the children damaged, while the original socialist ideals faded as a result of economic necessity.³⁰

Postmodernist constructs of sex, love, and gender collapse structured rules and political institutions. When the construction of family and nation as natural to human society is challenged as ideologically suspect, when queer and feminist theories promote resistance to "reproductive futurity," one wonders what hope is left for the legacy of secular Jewish culture, indeed, what future can be conceived, especially when the debate is locked in fixed politicized categories of "patriarchy" or "occupation."³¹ The postmodern threat to the Jewish family was perceived to be so serious that it became one of the contentious issues of the Israeli elections in 2019–2021 (as can be seen in pamphlets such as Rabbi Yigal Levenstein's controversial *Hamishpakhah shelanu: 'erkei hamishpakhah mul hatarbut hapostmodernit* [*Our family: Family values facing postmodern culture*, 2019]). The plethora of conferences and journal articles alerting Jewish educators to the challenges of postmodernism will, in fact, surprise anyone who thought postmodernist theory went out with the previous century; indeed, the breakdown of family values and disbelief in master narratives are hardly new. Rather, as the French sociologist and philosopher Shmuel Trigano argues in *La nouvelle idéologie dominante: Le post-modernisme* (*The new ruling ideology: Post-modernism*, 2014), postmodernism has become an ideological force, an anti-ideological ideology in an era after the end of ideologies, which is based in an intellectual elite that dominates government policies and shapes public opinion, setting new patterns of social behavior that blur gender and sexual boundaries and create a culture that relativizes all value systems in a globalized data network. Moreover, when postcolonial theorists and historians suspect any collective or communal identity of racism, one can ask to whom the individual is morally responsible and what constitutes identity.

Whereas Jewish redemptive narratives view history as a divinely ordained plan which nevertheless gives moral agency to individuals, secular writers present mortality as a terminal disease and share the Nietzschean despair of the present in contending with the possibility of a future that will be worse. The postmodern novels discussed in the preceding chapters sketch a world of chance in which individuals have limited moral responsibility for their actions in a soulless, calamitous world where the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' clock is edging close toward doomsday, and everything is getting worse. Well, can we know if there is order in global disorder? As Isaiah Berlin reminds us, in asking why events in what we call "history" happen, whether all is accident and chance or whether there is some central order that can explain it, Tolstoy would have known from Schopenhauer of the human tragedy that people persist in not realizing:

how little they can know of all the multitude of factors the orderly movement of which is the history of the world; above all, what presumptuous nonsense it is to claim to perceive an order merely on the strength of believing desperately that an order must exist, when all one actually perceives is meaningless chaos—a chaos of which the heightened form, the microcosm in which the disorder of human life is reflected in an intense degree, is war.³²

Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* demonstrates the differentials of infinitesimal details which cause events, to which we are blind. In citing these examples to make his point, Robert J. Aumann proposed in his 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance speech that change in human society depends on the equilibrium of cooperative and non-cooperative parties with a central decision-making authority, that is, it depends on rational decision making; this assumes a degree of free will that can paradoxically be predicted in chaos theory, which tracks patterns in disorder. The question, Aumann says, is as pertinent to economics and management strategies as it is to the building of nations and the Arab-Israeli conflict.³³

The paradox of determinism and choice, of necessity and contingency, contradicts existentialist arguments, for example, the one Camus puts forward in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the omnipotence of God is irreconcilable with the prevalence of evil. Judaism counters that (as the prophet Isaiah tells us) God created both good and evil. In a much-debated conundrum of Rabbi Akiva, the end is known, free choice is given (*Ethics of the Fathers*, 3:15): we are expected to accept moral responsibility without being expected to understand how God knows the outcome of our actions. Because each individual is endowed with free will, there is agency to effect small changes that, in a chain of unforeseen events (not unlike the butterfly effect I mentioned earlier), could contribute to *tikkun 'olam*.

Yokhanan ben Zakkai knew the destruction was coming that would fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah (BT Yoma 39b), but when it came,

he opted for Yavneh, not asking for Jerusalem to be saved. This does not mean that he gave up hope for restoring the spiritual center of the nation in Jerusalem. A midrash relates how Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues saw foxes among the ruins of the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. When they asked Akiva why he was laughing while they were crying, he reminded them of the prophecies of both destruction and redemption; only when the former was fulfilled would the latter be realized (BT Makkot 24b). The redemption of the nation from oppression is one stage in the universal redemption of the natural order in Isaiah's messianic vision of the lambs and lions grazing together at the end of days (an inspiration, derisively scorned in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, for internationalist Jews in revolutionary movements in the early twentieth century). In the postmodernist post-apocalypse, this vision which called for global peace and justice might seem more distant than ever. However, that surely says more about postmodernism than it does about the possibility of individuals working together for a better future.

Notes

- 1 D. G. Myers, "Michael Chabon's Imaginary Jews," *Sewanee Review* 116, no. 4 (2008): 574.
- 2 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 40.
- 3 Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (London: Serpent's Tail, 2012), 60.
- 4 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude, The Other Mexico, and Other Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 42.
- 5 Zygmunt Bauman, "On Postmodern Uses of Sex," *Theory, Culture & Society* 15, nos. 3–4 (1998): 19–33.
- 6 Bauman, "On Postmodern Uses of Sex."
- 7 Eva Illouz, *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.
- 8 Illouz, *The End of Love*, 8–10.
- 9 Michel Foucault, "We 'Other Victorians,'" *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Random House, 1978), vol. 1, 3–13.
- 10 William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 20. On the impact of the *Kinsey Report* on American Jewish thinkers such as Herman Wouk and Norman Lamm and its misrepresentation of sex among devout Jews, see Rachel Gordan, "Alfred Kinsey and the Remaking of Jewish Sexuality in the Wake of the Holocaust," *Jewish Social Studies* 20, no. 3 (Spring–Summer 2014): 72–99.
- 11 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 2.
- 12 Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, 3.
- 13 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 31.
- 14 Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age*, trans. Elie Leshem (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2017), 138–39. See on Shagar's response to postmodernism, Miriam Feldmann Kaye, *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019).

- 15 Shimon Gershon (Shagar), *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 131–51.
- 16 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, quoted in Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 141. On the Christian response to postmodern positions, see Carl Olson, *The Allure of Decadent Thinking: Religious Studies and the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 17 David Nirenberg, “Posthumous Love in Judaism,” in *Love after Death: Concepts of Posthumous Love in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bernhard Jussen and Ramie Targoff (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 55–70. On the development of Jewish thought about the next world, see Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994).
- 18 Quoted in Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 13.
- 19 See Octavio Paz, *Double Fire: Love and Eroticism*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 84.
- 20 J. B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2000), 28. See Shagar’s discussion of Soloveitchik’s understanding of marital sex and its relation to kabbalistic concepts, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 138–41.
- 21 See Hayim Navon, *Makim shorshim: bikoret yehudit ‘al hapiruk hapostmoderni* [*Striking Roots: A Jewish Critique of Postmodern Breakdown*] (Tel Aviv: Yedi’ot, 2018), 19–26.
- 22 J. B. Soloveitchik, *Besod hayakhid vehayakhad: mivkhar ketavim ‘ivriim* [*In Aloneness, in Togetherness: A Selection of Hebrew Writings*], ed. Pinchas H. Peli (Jerusalem: Orot, n.d.), 331–400; English version: *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen, My Beloved Knocks*, trans. David Z. Gordon (Brooklyn, NY: KTAV, 2006).
- 23 Leon Ebreo, *Dialogues of Love*, trans. Cosmos Damian Bacich and Rosella Pescatori (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 30.
- 24 Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 143. Shagar draws on a popular misunderstanding of Kierkegaard’s broken engagement to Regine Olsen, but more relevant is Kierkegaard’s analogy of the maiden who *yearns* for her lover as long as she is not *yawning* in marriage to him; see “Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments,” *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 190–91n.
- 25 Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 144–45.
- 26 Shagar, based on the Maharal’s *Netsekh yisrael* (*Faith Shattered and Restored*, 173–92).
- 27 Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.
- 28 Navon, *Makim shorshim*, 17–18. See also Eugene B. Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1991); Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, and Robert Gibbs, *Reasoning after Revelation: Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); S. Daniel Breslauer, *Toward a Jewish (M)Orality: Speaking of a Postmodern Jewish Ethics* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1998); Breslauer, *Creating a Judaism without Religion: A Postmodern Jewish Possibility* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001).
- 29 Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 146–51. On “hard” and “soft” postmodernism (terms coined by Millard J. Erickson), see *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 96–99.
- 30 On the kibbutz in American Jewish fiction, see Ranen Omer-Sherman, *Imagining the Kibbutz: Visions of Utopia in Literature and Film* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).
- 31 See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). For a queer reading of American Jewish women poets that promotes this agenda, see Zohar Weiman-Kelman, *Queer*

Expectations: A Genealogy of Jewish Women's Poetry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018). On the effects on demography and fertility of the single-parent and single-gender “new family” in Israel and the diaspora, see *Love, Marriage, and Jewish Families: Paradoxes of a Social Revolution*, ed. Sylvia Barack Fishman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015). Compared with low fertility rates among Jews in diaspora countries, an ageing population and births below mortality levels among Jews in diaspora countries in Israel, an average of 3.11 children were born per Jewish woman as of 2014, twice the current average of children among Jewish women in most diaspora Jewish communities (Sergio Della Pergola, “World Jewish Population, 2016,” in *The American Jewish Year Book, 2016, Volume 116*, ed. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin [Dordrecht: Springer, 2016], 253–332). The World Bank reported worldwide fertility rates falling consistently; for example, among the general population of the United States there were 1.8 births per woman in 2016 compared with 3.7 in 1960; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>.

- 32 Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), 271.
- 33 Robert J. Aumann, *War and Peace* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Center for the Study of Rationality, 2006). See Raymond-Alain Thiétart and Mark de Rond, *Chance, Choice and Determinism in Strategy*, Working Paper May 2004, Judge Institute of Management, University of Cambridge; https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/fileadmin/user_upload/research/workingpapers/wp0405.pdf; accessed February 21, 2018.



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