

Homelands of the Heart: Jewish Israel and Jewish Identity in American Jewish Fiction

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[This article examines depictions of Israel in current American Jewish fiction, using as a case study Philip Roth's two powerful recent works about Jews and Jewishness, a 1986 novel, *The Counterlife*, and a 1993 book, billed as "a confession," *Operation Shylock*.] Roth's books are fertile examples of the interaction between works of fiction and the social, religious, and cultural trends that surround the writer of fiction. This essay places *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* into the context of the current American Jewish environment and illuminates their exploration of the conflicting impact of the State of Israel, Eastern European origin, and America's open economic and social opportunities as factors defining the identity of Jews in the United States today.

In exploring Roth's depiction of Israel and Israelis, I focus primarily on the position of Israel in the American Jewish obsession with Jewish identity. A search for the essence of Jewish identity has become a focal point of contemporary American Jewish literary and intellectual exploration, spanning all brow levels, in works from the most complex fiction to the soap-operatic life-cycle angst of popular films and television programs. Jewish self-definition is salient in different ways to Diaspora writers and readers than it is to their Israeli counterparts. Unlike Israeli fiction, in which a character can be assumed to be Jewish unless he is identified as belonging to some other group, characters in fiction written outside Israel are not assumed to be Jewish without some indication of their Jewish identity. Sometimes only a distinctive Jewish name identifies literary characters as Jewish in American fiction. Other characters are equipped with some constellation of distinctive Jewish

characteristics; for example, a Jewish character is recognized as such because he/she is a Holocaust survivor or a Mosad agent or a *hasid* or a talkative Jewish intellectual.

Among the characteristics that lead people to define themselves and others as Jews, are residual European attitudes, tastes, and habits to which some American Jews of Eastern European origin ascribe centrality. One of the most talented chroniclers of the American Jewish experience, Alfred Kazin, at mid-century embodied Jewish identity in the Eastern European intellectual and emotional Jewish characteristics of his unmarried cousin and her friends. For Kazin, the epitome of Jewishness was found in such characteristics as political attitudes (socialist), physical attributes (dark complexion and hair), cultural mores (ceremonial eating, intense verbal interaction), and not least, vibrant intellectualism and idealism.¹ In contrast to this focus on the Eastern European wellsprings of American Jewish identity, some analysts have suggested that American Jewish identity is increasingly defined by identification with Israel, citing as evidence the ubiquitousness of references to Israel in nonfiction books and essays, in the Jewish and general press, and in recent popular and serious American Jewish fiction. Diverging from emphasis on ethnic or nationalistic factors, some insist that adherence to religious observances defines and links Jews around the world, serving as a passport

- 1 They were all dressmakers, like my mother; had worked with my mother in the same East Side sweatshops; were all passionately loyal members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union; and all were unmarried...there they were in our own dining room, our cousin and her two friends...arguing my father down on small points of Socialist doctrine. As they sat around the cut-glass bowl on the table — cracking walnuts, expertly peeling the skin off an apple in long even strips, cozily sipping at a glass of tea — they crossed their legs in comfort and gave off a deliciously musky fragrance of face powder that instantly framed them for me in all their dark coloring, brilliantly white teeth, and the rosy Russian blouses that swelled and rippled in terraces of embroidery over their opulent breasts.... I was suddenly glad to be a Jew, as these women were Jews — simply and naturally glad of those Jewish dressmakers who spoke with enthusiastic familiarity of Sholem Aleichem and Peretz, Gorky and Tolstoy, who glowed at every reminiscence of Nijinsky, of Nazimova in *The Cherry Orchard*, of Pavlova in "The Swan." Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (1951), quoted in *Writing Our Lives: Autobiographies of American Jews, 1890–1990*, ed. Steven J. Rubin (Philadelphia and New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 134–137.

into Jewish peoplehood. Still others have asserted that Jews in the United States are a unique hybrid group who are fundamentally different from their coreligionists living in other countries now and in the past.

Particularly salient to this dichotomy between Israeli and Diaspora Jewish identity is a primary principle of literary deconstructionism; that whenever people perceive and articulate a given reality in terms of a binary opposition, they are also, consciously or unconsciously, ranking the two halves of that opposition.² When analysts contrast Israeli Jewry with Diaspora Jewry, a hierarchy is implicit or explicit in their comparison. Either Israeli Jewry or Diaspora Jewry is seen as occupying a superior, nationalistic, political, religious, cultural, or moral position, depending on the observer. This type of hierarchical perception of ranking of world-wide Jewry has important ramifications for the relationship between Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora, of course; and it also has particular ramifications for Diaspora Jews who struggle with the issue of which factors define Jewish identity today.

Defining an Identity for America's Jews

Defining Jewish identity attained urgency in the 1980s, when the government of Israel considered narrowing the Law of Return — which grants automatic citizenship in the Jewish state to all persons claiming to be Jewish. In the face of escalating rates of mixed marriage, large portions of the American Jewish community exploded in anger and outrage, articulated by national Jewish organizations, at the idea that they or their descendants might be deprived of the privileges of the Law of Return. Although attempts to change the Law of Return were tabled, partially in response to pressure from the American Jewish community, the controversy left unhealed wounds in the United States.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Margins*, 329, cited in Deborah Eskin, "Deconstruction," in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 376.

Just as unrest over the Israeli episode was subsiding, some results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations increased levels of American Jewish anxiety.³ The study showed that secular Jewish activism had declined among younger American Jews. It suggested that the American Jewish community is polarized between Jews who define themselves as "Jewish by religion," and tend to be identified with the Jewish community, people, and/or religious customs, and those who say they do not think of themselves as Jewish by religion, who tend to have few if any ties with Jewish life. Strikingly high levels of overlap between Israel-centeredness and social, sacred, and communal Jewish behaviors and attitudes were seen among younger American Jews.⁴ Young American adults who volunteer time for Jewish organizations, work for and give money to philanthropies that distribute funds to Jews in Israel and world-wide, and have many Jewish friends, for example, also tend to belong to synagogues. This religiously and institutionally active group is far more likely to express a deep attachment to Israel. In contrast, another large group of young American Jews have few Jewish friends, do not belong to synagogues, do not volunteer time for Jewish organizations, have never visited Israel, and do not give money to agencies working for world-wide Jewry.

The results of the 1990 NJPS were deeply disturbing to many American Jews, especially to older American Jewish liberals. American Jews had long cherished the concept of "the Jewish heart." For

- 3 The first national study of American Jews undertaken since 1970, the 1990 NJPS, conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations, studied over 5,000 Jewish households, which were found after extensive screening through random digit dialing techniques. These households represent Jews across the country living in communities of diverse size and composition. A summary of the findings is provided by Barry A. Kosmin, Sidney Goldstein, Joseph Waksberg, Nava Lerer, Ariella Keysar, and Jeffrey Scheckner: *Highlights of the CJF Jewish Population Survey* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991). More detailed examinations of the 1990 NJPS data are being published in the form of a series of monographs.
- 4 In the context of the demographic analysis, "younger" is defined as ages 18 to 44. For an interesting analysis of these patterns, see Steven M. Cohen, *Content or Continuity? Alternative Bases for Commitment* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991).

twentieth-century American Jews who had chosen the middle road of acculturation rather than either a total rejection of American mores or total assimilation, a spectrum of communal and religious options had provided both focus and support for Jewish identification. A network of local and national Jewish communal organizations provided secular outlets for Jewish identity and concern. Persons who described themselves as "not religious" could still express their commitment to Jewish destiny and Jewish peoplehood by working for Jewish federations, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, and scores of other organizations.⁵ In combination with either communal or religious expressions of Jewish identification — or both — the Jewish commitment of American Jews often coalesced around personal and communal support for the Jewish state.

One of the primary articles of faith supporting the concept of civic Judaism was that Jews could retain their passion for the Jewish people and Jewish ideals without any of the overt trappings of the Jewish religion or culture. Thus persons with a "Jewish heart" might work hard for civil rights in the United States and Israel, reflecting their commitment to Jewish prophetic ideals of justice, and contribute large amounts of money to rescuing Jews in countries where Jews are persecuted, without participating in other forms of Jewish religious or communal life. In contrast to these widespread beliefs, data from the 1990 NJPS indicated that while persons with such secular "Jewish hearts" were fairly common among American Jews over age forty-five, the faith of the Jewish heart unsupported by more Jewishly particularistic forms of identification did not seem to be effectively transferred to younger generations of American Jews.⁶

Many concerns loomed large: Until modern times, it was seldom necessary to separate out the ethnic, religious, and social strands

5 Jonathan Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civic Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

6 See, for example, Sidney Goldstein, *Profile of American Jewry: Insights from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey*, North American Jewish Data Bank Occasional Papers No. 6 (New York: Mandell L. Berman Institute North American Jewish Data Bank, Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York, May 1993).

that made Jews distinctive. For most of Jewish history, a variety of Judaisms incorporated the attributes of peoplehood, civilization, and religion, and a Jew was an individual who followed a life style shaped by Jewish laws, cultures, and societies. Although Jews were often Jewish because they had no choice but to be Jewish, the complex fabric of Jewish culture did much to define each Jew as an individual. America's egalitarian and open society, the evidence suggested, might have irrevocably weakened Jewish commitment. "Who is a Jew?" and "Who is an American Jew?" suddenly seemed very urgent questions indeed.

Socioreligious changes in American Jewish life were paralleled by changes in American Jewish literature and film. Despite expressions of Jewish identification, by the middle of the twentieth century the personal assimilation of American Jews was proceeding briskly and had become the subject of lively exploration by American Jewish authors. Artists such as Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Woody Allen established Jewish fiction and film as a species of regional American expression — like fiction and films about life in the South — in which the Jewish characters were particularly interesting and appealing because they stood both inside and outside mainstream American culture. Jewish male protagonists became the new American antihero. For decades the angst-ridden assimilation of American Jewish men was depicted as being the interesting part about being a Jew in America. Brilliant, neurotic, sensitive, funny — and articulate — Jewish men loved and hated American culture, and provided Americans with an irresistible commentary on and illumination of the world they inhabited.⁷

- 7 The protagonists of such fiction as Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and such films as Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* voiced emotions that resonated for American Jews. In the words of Roth's Alexander Portnoy: "How do they get so gorgeous, so healthy, so *blond*? My contempt for what they believe in is more than neutralized by my adoration of the way they look, the way they move and laugh and speak — the lives they must lead behind those *goyische* curtains! Maybe a pride of *shikses* is more like it — or is it a pride of *shkotzim*? For these are the girls whose older brothers are the engaging goodnatured, confident, clean, swift, and powerful halfbacks for the college football teams.... Their fathers are men with white hair and deep voices who never use double negatives, and their mothers the ladies with the kindly smiles and the wonderful manners...these blond-haired Christians are the legitimate

However, in the late 1970s and 1980s, the assimilatory struggle was beginning to lose its bite, as new generations of American Jews matured who had no memories of — and no rebellion against — more intensely Jewish communities. Both established and emerging American Jewish authors began struggling with the transformation of Jewish identity and found compelling new elements to weave into their work, especially explorations of the impact of the Holocaust and the State of Israel.⁸ Few events changed the self-image of American Jews as comprehensively as the existence and physical triumphs of Israel. A people derided for centuries as being weak and cowardly and unable to relate to pride of land was now briefly extolled and then often criticized as being aggressive, expansionist, and overly concerned with nationalistic considerations. Some Jews were proud of Israel, some embarrassed by it — but few now thought, like Philip Roth's early heroes, that only gentile boys knew how to fix cars and fight.

Israel became a wellspring for a variety of enriching experiences and myths — paradoxically, making American Jews feel both more Jewish and more like physically empowered citizens of the Western world. Because of Israel, as well as because of rapidly expanding

owners of this place.... O America! America! it may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me... America is a *shikse* nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!" Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969), 163–165.

- 8 Rather than the largest output of expression about the Holocaust coming in the decades immediately after World War II, it came much later, at a point when the generation of survivors was beginning to die. The American Jewish reading and viewing public seemed more willing to confront the horrors of the Nazi years and to think about what they might mean to them on a personal and communal level. This preoccupation with the Holocaust helped to fuel vocal American Jewish activism on behalf of Jewish as well as American civil rights causes: Israel and world-wide Jewry. For a time, the definition of Jewishness seemed to be someone who had internalized the motto "Never again." Among the many fine books dealing with the Holocaust, see Hugh Nissenson, *In the Reign of Peace* (New York, 1968); Cynthia Ozick, *The Messiah of Stockholm* (New York: Knopf, 1987), and *The Shawl* (New York: Knopf, 1989); and Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), and *The Bellarosa Connection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).

American social and occupational opportunities, Jews had a new vision of themselves. At the same time, however, older visions of the Jewish character persisted. The image of the valorous, forthright, aggressive Israeli Jew existed simultaneously with the image of the sly, overly intellectual, adaptable Europeanized Jew.⁹ The quintessential Jewish character might be a product of centuries of Diaspora life or a citizen of the Jewish state. Could a nation — or individuals in that nation — live two lives at once?

Israel as an Existential Setting in American Jewish Fiction

Philip Roth's dazzling ventriloquism, which we will explore shortly, articulating a multiplicity of voices in the complex political and philosophical twistings and turnings of contemporary Zionism, does not take place in a vacuum. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of American Jewish fiction dealing with Israel today is how interested it is in ambiguities and complexities, and how particularistic it is. Israel, both as a separate subject and in combination with other aspects of Jewish history, including the Holocaust, continues to figure prominently in American Jewish fiction, albeit no longer through the romantic glow it enjoyed earlier in Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958). While Uris himself continues in the "Jews equal good, Arabs equal bad" mode in *The Haj* (1984), a historical novel depicting the Arab-Jewish struggle leading up to and following the establishment of the State of Israel, the works of Israeli novelists and poets in translation have worked to counteract the stereotype of Israel as an idyllic and morally untroubled land.

It is certainly true that translations of classical, poetic, tradition-steeped works by S. Y. Agnon tend to intensify feelings of the mystical connection that Jews around the world may feel toward Jewish tradition and the Jewish homeland. However, each year

9 The persistence of the Europeanized Jewish image is hilariously captured in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall*, when protagonist Alvy Singer sits at his quintessentially gentile girlfriend's quintessentially gentile dinner table in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and imagines that, in the eyes of her anti-Semitic grandmother, he is suddenly transformed from a nervous, neurotic, New York Jewish agnostic into a red-bearded, black-hatted Hasidic Jew with *payot*.

numerous translations of works by such realistic contemporary Israeli artists as Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, Jacob Barzilai, Yehuda Amichai, Yaakov Shabtai, Shulamith Hareven, Amalia Kahana Karmon, Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, Yoram Kaniuk, David Shahar, Yehoshua Kenaz, Sami Michael, David Grossman, Amos Kenan, and others instruct American Jewish readers in the perception that Israeli society is as complex and troubled as that of any other land. Moreover, left-liberal publications influential in intellectual and academic circles, such as the *New York Review of Books*, have repeatedly included many articles that were intensely critical of Israel and focused on the internal and external challenges to Israeli society.

Fictional pictures of Israel are far from limited to translations from Hebrew authors, however. Israel has provided an immensely fertile focus for American Jewish writing. Ted Solotaroff cogently notes that "the survival of Israel has been the paramount concern of organized Jewish life and probably the paramount source of Jewish identity" for many American Jews during the past quarter of a century.¹⁰ This centrality is emphatically reflected in American fiction. American Jewish fiction dealing with Israel, which has increased in recent years, can be divided into three basic types: serious explorations of Israeli life, society, and history; popular fiction, including romances and mysteries, which make use of Israel as an exotic and appealing locale; and works that, rather than portraying Israeli life as an entity unto itself, present the Jewish state in its relationship to American Jewish life, as an alternative or as a source of revitalization. Israel figures prominently in fiction by such authors as Saul Bellow, Chaim Potok, Elie Wiesel, Jay Neugeboren, Hugh Nissenson, E. M. Broner, Tova Reich, Mark Helprin, and many others.

Both authors and readers of American Jewish literature were profoundly affected by news from Israel, especially after the "Six-Day War" in 1967 marked a watershed in American Jewish involvement with Israel. The acquisition of such historically evocative sites as the Old City of Jerusalem and the Etzion Block, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the ill-fated war in Lebanon, the occupation and settlement of

10 Ted Solotaroff, "American-Jewish Writers: On Edge Once More," *New York Times Book Review*, 18 December 1988, pp. 1, 31, 33.

the West Bank, and the Intifada were continuing preoccupations of the American Jewish public. The early wars awakened in American Jewry a terrified recollection of the Holocaust; the reunification of Jerusalem and the apparent strength of the Israeli state created widespread feelings of nationalistic pride and confidence; the growing and much-publicized strength of right-wing religious nationalism among some factions of Israeli society disturbed the placid surface of American Zionism. On a less edifying plane, note must be taken as well of the extraordinary proliferation of thrillers, mysteries, and political fantasies set in Israel. Paul Breines terms this "the Rambowitz syndrome" and comments that he knows of "roughly fifty" novels that "are linked by their idealized representation of Jewish warriors, tough guys, gangsters, Mosad agents, and Jews of all ages and sexes who fight back against their tormentors."¹¹

Many American Jewish writers link the events and the lessons of the Holocaust to their depictions of Israel, following the powerful lead of Elie Wiesel. In observing current events, Wiesel is prompt to draw the lessons of his own history and the history of the Jews, and he remains one of the most alert, passionate, and articulate defenders of Jews around the world, confronting world leaders and intellectual faddists alike to speak up for the dead Jews of Auschwitz and the living Jews in the State of Israel. In a condemnation of the United Nations resolution on "Zionism and racism," for example, Wiesel comments bitterly that the resolution is "shocking and revolting," and that it reflects a "process" that "is not new; it has endured for some two thousand years."¹² Wiesel can never forget — and he never lets the reader forget — that the Holocaust has profound spiritual implications for contemporary Jews. Indeed, one recurring motif in Wiesel's work is the agonizing conflict between the prophetic ideals of justice and mercy, on the one hand, and the physical and emotional strength that is necessary if the Jewish people are to survive in a grossly imperfect world, on the other hand. Having witnessed the utter indifference of much of the world to the near destruction of

11 Paul Breines, "The Rambowitz Syndrome," *Tikkun* 5 (6) November–December 1990, 17–18.

12 Elie Wiesel, "Zionism and Racism," *A Jew Today* (New York: Random House, 1978), 41–43.

the Jews, Wiesel comes down unflinchingly on the side of Jewish survival. However, he is ever cognizant of the spiritual price that survival exacts. Ultimately, one may say that Wiesel's anguished argument is at least as much with God as with humankind, for having created a world in which even caring and kindly people are forced sometimes to kill innocent creatures.¹³

The moral dilemmas that Wiesel explores have particular resonance for post-Holocaust Jewish communities. For many contemporary Jews, Jewish survival has become the primary moral obligation. Israel occupies a paramount position when Jewish writers contemplate Jewish survival, but Israel's position in the constellation of factors defining contemporary Jewish identity is less clear. Because of perceived divergence between the demands of physical survival and the definition of Jewishness in the modern world, Israel has become a catalyst for spiritual self-examination among American Jewish authors. Even the titles of many American Jewish books about experiences in Israel are evocative. Consider the existential aura of such titles as Vanessa Ochs's *Words on Fire: One Woman's Journey into the Sacred* (1990), Hugh Nissenson's *In the Reign of Peace* (1972), Jay Neugeboren's *The Stolen Jew* (1981), Elie Wiesel's *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (1970), Meyer Levin's *The Harvest* (1978), Alice Bloch's *The Law of Return* (1983), Marcia Freedman's *Exile in the Promised Land* (1990), and Saul Bellow's *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account* (1976).

The State of Israel provides the physical, intellectual, and emotional setting in which many American Jewish writers confront and re-examine the nature of Jewish peoplehood and the role of Jewishness in defining their being. American Jews who have every intention that their journey will be "to Jerusalem — and back" find

13 In Elie Wiesel's *Dawn*, the protagonist demands, "Don't judge me, judge God," because God "created a universe and made justice to stem from injustice. He brought it about that a people should attain happiness through tears, that the freedom of a nation, like that of a man, should be built upon a pile, a foundation of dead bodies." Wiesel's protagonist comes to the startling conclusion that Jews must learn "the art of hate" in order to guarantee their physical survival. "Otherwise," he argues, "our future will only be an extension of the past." Elie Wiesel, *Dawn* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 18, 26, 28–30, 40, 67–69, 86.

themselves exploring both sides of that equation: what ties them to Jerusalem — and what ties them to the United States?

Philip Roth on “Who Is a Jew?”

During the past decade, one American Jewish author who has devoted enormous amounts of creative energy to exploring issues of Jewish identity and the role of Israel in the forging of that identity is Philip Roth. For Roth’s Jewish characters in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, personal identity is intimately tied up with Jewish identity and with Israel. In his books (as in reality) secular and traditionalist Jews in Israel and America each have very different assumptions about what makes a Jew Jewish. For assimilated American Jews such as *The Counterlife*’s Henry Zuckerman, a responsible dentist-businessman-family man, the simple bottom line of being a Jew is dichotomous — a Jew is not a Christian; gentiles “observe Christmas and we do not” (41). For irreligious but profoundly Zionist Israelis such as Shuki Elchanan and his father, a nationalistic Israel is the answer to what is a Jew, because only in Israel is all of existence suffused with Jewish identity: “See that bird? That’s a Jewish bird. See, up there? A Jewish cloud. There is no country for a Jew but here.... We are living in a Jewish theater and you [Diaspora Jewry] are living in a Jewish museum.”¹⁴

In the “Judea” segment of *The Counterlife*, for the literally born-again Henry being Jewish means identifying spiritually and ethnically with the most fundamentalist, distinctive, particularistic — and putatively most “authentic” — Jews he can find, the ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews of Me’ah She’arim and the Israeli *yeshivot*. Pointing out squat, black-garbed, bearded men, sexless women, and pale children with long earlocks, he declares: “I am nothing, I have never been *anything*, the way that I am this Jew.... I am not *just* a Jew, I’m not *also* a Jew — *I’m a Jew as deep as those Jews...* that is the root of my life!” (61). For West Bank militants, such as the fiery Rabbi Lippman, Jewishness must be redefined as a blending of piety with

14 Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 52.

biblically based ferocity. He warns Jews that they must relinquish the role of victim, that there is no morality without survival (116).

Anti-Semitism is a virulent force that continues to define the Jew no matter where he lives, in both *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. Israelis feel anti-Semitism keenly, Roth suggests, because on the world stage anti-Semitism has been transformed into anti-Zionism. Worse, in an ironic twist, it is politically correct to lambast Zionism, because Zionism is "racist." In *The Counterlife*, Buki, an Israeli metalworker, tells Nathan:

I am in Norway on business for my product and written on a wall I read, "Down with Israel." I think, What did Israel ever do to Norway? I know Israel is a terrible country, but after all, there are countries even more terrible...why is this country the most terrible? Why don't you read on Norwegian walls, "Down with Russia," "Down with Chile," "Down with Libya"?.... Sir, why all over the world do they hate Menachem Begin? Because of politics? In Bolivia, in China, in Scandinavia, what do they care about Begin's politics? they hate him because of his nose! (123)

Nathan Zuckerman does not actually share the politics of a West Bank militant, but he learns to share his passionate understanding of the enemy, the infinite permutations of anti-Semitism, as Lippman explains:

Can a Jew do anything that doesn't stink to high heaven of his Jewishness? There are the goyim to whom we stink because they look down on us, and there are the goyim to whom we stink because they look up to us.... First it was Jewish clannishness that was repellent, then what was preposterous was the ridiculous phenomenon of Jewish assimilation, now it is Jewish independence that is unacceptable and unjustified. First it was Jewish passivity that was disgusting, the meek Jews, the accommodating Jew, the Jew who walked like a sheep to his own slaughter — now what is worse than disgusting, outright wicked, is Jewish strength and militancy. (128–129)

Each of the four segments in *The Counterlife* presents an alternative version of the destiny of the Zuckerman brothers. Roth links the

sections with references to a ceremony powerfully symbolic and evocative of the most basic elements of historical Jewish identity, the “biblical injunction” in Genesis 17 that God marks his covenant with the Jewish people through the act of fathers circumcising their male children. The secular Israeli Shuki warns Nathan that if his “English rose,” his pregnant gentile mistress, gives birth to a boy, Nathan will find it “difficult” to “have a son who wasn’t circumcised.” When Nathan is skeptical that circumcision will matter to such a secular, liberal, and liberated Diaspora Jew as himself, Shuki asks: “Why do you pretend to be so detached from your Jewish feelings? In the books all you seem to be worrying about is what on earth a Jew is, while in life you pretend that you’re content to be the last link in the Jewish chain of being.” (73)

The Israelis in *The Counterlife* turn out to be good prophets of Nathan’s ineradicable Jewishness. In an unforgettable moment (“Christendom”), in an elegant, refined, and understated British restaurant, Nathan Zuckerman actually stinks to high heaven of his Jewishness — as Lippman has predicted — when an English matron loudly demands that a waiter open the window because “there’s a terrible smell in here.... The stink in here is abominable.” (291) Moreover, his wife’s mother and sister reveal themselves to be deeply anti-Semitic as well. Later, Roth has Nathan’s wife Maria ask him, “Why do Jews make such a bloody fuss about being Jewish?” (300) She decides that since all Jews seem to retain a Jewish consciousness, they are all the same, in an unknowing reformulation of the Jewish religious injunction that every Jew is connected to every other Jew. “You are your brother!” she accuses. “You are Mordecai Lippman!” (304)

In a stunning epiphany, Nathan commits himself to Jewish identity and concludes the novel by declaring that his newborn son must indeed be circumcised, because that covenant in the flesh of the infant makes a Jew of him by linking him irrevocably to Jewish history:

Circumcision is startling all right...but then maybe that’s what the Jews had in mind and what makes the act seem quintessentially Jewish and the mark of their reality. Circumcision makes it clear as can be that you are here and not there, that you are

out and not in — also that you are mine and not theirs. There is no way around it: you enter history through my history and me.

By the end of *The Counterlife*, Nathan Zuckerman has determined that he is, in his deepest core of being, more than he is anything else, “a Jew” (323–324). This discovery, however, does not resolve his questions about the nature of Jewish identity. In *Operation Shylock* Roth moves in a new, but related, direction: given the “irreducible” element of Jewishness in the soul, what is more consonant with American Jewish identity, feelings of connectedness to Israel or to the peculiarly creative insider-outsider posture of Diaspora Jewry?

Through a Glass, Darkly

Roth has often been subjected to the claim that, because he usually focuses his comic aim at Jewish characters and societies, he is a primary example of the self-hating Jewish anti-Semite. In *Operation Shylock*, Roth links those readers’ frequent literary obtuseness with the distortions of Judaism and Jews propagated for centuries by anti-Semites. For centuries the lives of Jews changed and shifted, but the non-Jews around them persisted in considering every Jew to be Shylock:

This is Europe’s Jew, the Jew expelled in 1290 by the English, the Jew banished in 1492 by the Spanish, the Jew terrorized by Poles, butchered by Russians, incinerated by Germans, spurned by the British and the Americans while the furnaces roared at Treblinka.... [now these Jews live] in the Mediterranean’s tiniest country — still considered too large by all the world. (275)

The Jew, putatively personifying every characteristic that Europeans had hoped to expunge from themselves, became the Christian European’s *Doppelgänger*, his “savage, repellent, and villainous” (274) dark shadow. In this assertion, Roth anticipates current historical and literary analysis of the legacy of the Shylock character, which points out that *The Merchant of Venice* was a favorite play of the Nazis; they seized upon it gleefully. “‘There,’ they could say, ‘is the

Jew!”¹⁵ Despite the Jew’s victimization by the Nazis and despite his victorious transformation into a member of a sovereign, militarily powerful nation, in the pervasive vision of the anti-Semite the Jew will always be Shylock, Roth asserts.

Roth connects the anti-Semitic need to see the Jew as Shylock with contemporary revisionist historians’ attempts to erase the reality of the Holocaust itself. As one of *Operation Shylock’s* characters declares: “Did six million really die? Come off it. The Jews pulled a fast one on us again, keeping alive their new religion, Holocaustomania.” (253) Sometimes revisionism takes the form of disbelieving that former Nazis ever committed their horrendous acts because they later, like Ivan Demjanjuk, became their own doubles: banally normal, responsible, family-oriented citizens in midwestern American towns. The Jews perpetrating the trials of these seemingly innocent gentiles appear to be Shylocks, bent on collecting their pound of flesh.

If this seems confusing to you, dear reader, suggests Roth, think of how strange it is that multiple realities permeate the very air we breathe. Realities multiply horizontally and vertically. That is, people and societies can experience a variety of different existences sequentially, as did both the perpetrators and the victims of the Holocaust, who moved from a nightmare existence into seemingly ordinary American daylight. In Jerusalem, as Moishe Pipick watches Philip Roth watching Demjanjuk and his accusers, it becomes clear that the realities of Jews are especially strange. The name “Jew” is used for different types of people: American Jews and European Jews and Sephardi Jews and Israeli Jews and the grotesque image of Jews who inspired the character of Shylock are all called by the name “Jew.” What is even stranger, Roth insists, the Jewish people include many disparate individuals and disparate societies as well. The Jewish people war amongst themselves as to how Jewishness is defined because each Jew is comprised of numerous Jews:

Divided is nothing. Even the goyim are divided. But inside every Jew there is a mob of Jews. The good Jew, the bad Jew. The new Jew, the old Jew. The lover of Jews, the hater of Jews. The friend of the goy, the enemy of the goy. The arrogant Jew,

15 Louis Simpson, “There, They Could Say, Is the Jew: *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*, by John Gross,” *New York Times Book Review*, 4 April 1993, 7, 9.

the wounded Jew. The pious Jew, the rascal Jew. The coarse Jew, the gentle Jew. The defiant Jew, the appeasing Jew. The Jewish Jew, the de-Jewed Jew.... Is it any wonder that the Jew is always disputing? He is a dispute, incarnate! (334)

Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jews are creatures so different that they are not even recognizable to each other as Jews, several characters in *Operation Shylock* insist. Characters who are anti-Zionist use the differences between European and Israeli Jewish characteristics to deride and delegitimize Israeli Jews, claiming that Israeli Jews are not “really” Jewish. Although the Jews in Eastern Europe were tormented by their enemies, they had Jewish souls, one character asserts, but Jews in Israel “are Jews in a Jewish country without a Jewish soul.” (109)

The setting of *Operation Shylock*, even more than *The Counterlife*, is Israel, and the book explores, among other issues, connections between the Holocaust and the establishment and continuing development of the State of Israel. Interwoven with themes of Jewish identity are considerations of historicity, as embodied in the relationship between the narrative, the narrator, and the historical context. All of these themes are tied together with metaphors of multiple identity even more complex than those in *The Counterlife*. *Operation Shylock* prickles with splintered narratives, as characters with widely divergent historical perspectives wrestle with questions about who represents the “real” Jew and which of the very different cultures depicted comprises a genuine Jewish peoplehood and civilization.

Several characters in *Operation Shylock* argue for a Diaspora-centered rather than an Israel-centered foundation of Jewish identity. Moishe Pipick proposes a theory called Diasporism, in opposition to Zionism. Smilesburger, a Mosad executive posing as an addled Holocaust survivor, mockingly claims that Jews of Eastern European Jewish ancestry — even Ashkenazi Israelis — are in fact totally defined by being Jews from Poland or Ukraine:

The roots of American Jewry are not in the Middle East but in Europe — their Jewish style, their Jewish words, their strong nostalgia, their actual, weighable history, all this issues from their European origins Grandpa did not hail from Haifa —

Grandpa came from Minsk. Grandpa wasn't a Jewish nationalist — he was a Jewish humanist, a spiritual, believing Jew, who complained not in an antique tongue called Hebrew but in colorful, rich, vernacular Yiddish.¹⁶

Moishe Pipik notes that although American Jews can see that they have almost nothing in common with Israeli Jews, they are willing to do almost anything for Israel. He warns that any American Jew is in danger of being a Jonathan Pollard, because American Jews are obsessed with saving Jewish lives, and helping Israel means saving Jewish lives. Thus Israel, by its very existence, endangers the lives of contemporary Diaspora Jews. (81) Even worse, the disguised Mosadnik Smilesburger sardonically claims, the State of Israel endangers the lives of Israeli Jews as well. Because they are like the Jews of the Bible — Jews in a Jewish land who are not acting Jewishly — God will punish them with the sweeping retribution with which he punished biblical Jews. The Arabs will sweep down upon modern-day Israel just as their enemies served as God's avenging hand and swept down upon the sinning Israelites and Judeans of the past.

To avert this seemingly inevitable catastrophe, Moishe Pipik, posing as Philip Roth, goes about Israel preaching the gospel of Diasporism: he urges all Jews of Eastern European origin to return to the true homelands of their hearts, the Eastern European countries from which they came. (87) Outright enemies of the State of Israel praise the Eastern European Jewish character as well. A University of Chicago-educated Palestinian now living on the West Bank, George Ziad, rants passionately in *Operation Shylock* about the fraudulence of Israeli claims for Jewishness and the superiority of the Eastern European Jews. The true and valuable Jewish character, claims Ziad, is the Diaspora Jewish character, that of "real Jews...truly superior people," who displayed "vitality," "irony," "human sympathy," "human tolerance," and "goodness of heart." Israel, in contrast, is the only place Ziad has ever been "where all the Jews are stupid." Israel is "a country lacking in every quality that gave the Jews their great distinction":

16 Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 47.

These victorious Jews are terrible people. I don't just mean the Kahanes and the Sharons. I mean them all, the Yehoshuas and the Ozes included. The good ones who are against the occupation of my father's house, the "beautiful Israelis" who want their Zionist thievery and their clean conscience too.... What do they know about "Jewish".... Jews without tolerance, Jews for whom it is always black and white, who have all these crazy splinter parties, who have a party of one man, they are so intolerant of one another — these are a people who are superior to the Jews in the Diaspora?.... Here they are authentic, here, locked up in their Jewish ghetto, and armed to the teeth? And you there, you are "unauthentic," living freely with all of mankind.... As if speaking Hebrew is the culmination of human achievement!.... Who do they think they are, these provincial nobodies? (124–125)

Ziad, percolating with utter hatred for Israelis and the State of Israel, agrees with Moishe Pipik that Eastern European Jews should all go back to Poland and Austria and Ukraine.

Ziad, *Operation Shylock's* lapsed and then politically reborn Palestinian, insists that the plight of the Palestinians has been immeasurably worsened because of the cynical way in which Israeli politicians have used the Holocaust for propaganda value. After the Israeli victory in 1967, Ziad insists, members of the government, who had previously been embarrassed by their victimized progenitors, found it expedient "to remind the world, minute by minute, hour by hour, day in and day out, that the Jews were victims before they were conquerors and that they are conquerors only because they are victims."¹⁷ The conquest and continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, says Ziad, has been facilitated because "There's no business like *Shoah* business." (132–133) As a result of the extended occupation, and its accompanying brutality, the lives of the Palestinians frequently parallel the lives of oppressed European Jews.

Operation Shylock suggests that the Palestinian has become in

17 For a nonfiction, Israeli exploration of similar ideas, see Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993).

some ways the double of the Jew. Roth's empathetic skill in rendering these parallels deceives at least one critic, Harold Bloom, into seeing Israel-hater Ziad as the book's most sympathetic character.¹⁸ On the contrary, in the context of the plot as a mystery quest for Jewish identity, protagonist Philip Roth says he listens to anti-Israeli diatribes "with coldhearted fascination," as if he were "a well-placed spy" (129) — which he later becomes. He understands exactly how Ziad and men like him feel, exactly what they are experiencing, but he knows them to be in opposition to Israel's welfare and survival. Despite his sympathy and his awareness of the ways in which their experience mirrors his own, he is a partisan to the Israeli cause. The actual author Roth's own partisanship — unlike that of some other American Jewish intellectuals and writers, who publicly hectored or abandoned Israel when they found its behavior politically incorrect — is cryptically signaled in a conversation on the West Bank, in which the protagonist asserts, "Arafat can differentiate between Woody Allen and Philip Roth." (155)

Roth signals his partisanship to the reader in several ways. Plot developments and the actions of characters provide important clues; but perhaps even more significant are the ways in which he delegitimizes certain characters. Ziad, like some of Shakespeare's profoundly appealing villains, often speaks to the reader's heart. Roth has almost certainly devised Ziad's name as an inversion of the name of literary critic Edward Said, who often criticizes Israeli policies. The name Ziad also echoes the sound of Jihad, the holy Islamic war against the State of Israel. Protagonist Roth listens to Ziad and transmits the Palestinian's often valid cultural critique of Israeli politics and society. Ultimately, however, through his words and his actions the protagonist rejects the moral validity of Ziad's claim.

The hyperbolic Diasporism of Moishe Pipick and George Ziad is meant to go to absurd extremes. The fact that Arab enemies of Israel would like to see the Jews return from whence they came is one warning alarm about nostalgia for the Diaspora Jewish personality. Protagonist Philip Roth vigorously opposes this plan, insisting

18 Harold Bloom, "Operation Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, by Philip Roth," *New York Review of Books*, 22 April 1993, 45–48.

that all of Christian Europe would be appalled if the descendants of Europe's slaughtered Jewry were to return to their European homelands. (156) Christian Europeans ranging from uneducated common men to the pope are probably secretly happy about the results of Hitler's "little miracle," he insists. Underlying the clever games with mirrors is Roth's warning that many qualities that Jews and non-Jews alike may prize in the Diaspora Jewish personality are based on vulnerability to the ever-present reality of anti-Semitism. The protagonist explodes in anger when contemporary Israelis are compared to the Nazis, who

didn't break hands. They engaged in industrial annihilation of human beings. They made a manufacturing process of death. Please, no metaphors where there is recorded history. (142)

Yet the author knows that the reader knows full well that people — including himself — are continuously constructing metaphors in the face of recorded history. While Jews may argue among themselves about "who is a Jew" and endlessly examine their splintered identities, Roth suggests, one of the primary defining factors of Jewishness are the boundaries provided by anti-Semitism, embodied on two historical sides by the European anti-Semites who participated in the Holocaust and by those among the Arab population who would happily do away with the Jewish state. Roth suggests that complicating the enmity of the relationship between Jews and the persons who hate them are the emotional and symbolic elements that connect them. He indicates that European anti-Semites hated the Jews with an implacable hatred partly because they envied them and partly because they projected onto the Jewish personality everything they hated about themselves and wished to eradicate from themselves. *Operation Shylock* indicates that some Palestinians, on the other hand, hate the Jews of the Jewish state because they see the parallels between the now stateless Palestinians and the once stateless Jews, and they believe that Palestinians have been turned into the Jews of the Middle East and made to suffer for the deeds of European Christianity.

The author Philip Roth delegitimizes Moishe Pipick, the champion of the Diaspora Jewish identity, through the blackly ribald ending that protagonist Roth writes for his pretender. Moishe Pipick, a

shadowy character much like Roth yet very different from him as well, is terminally ill from cancer. His life is inexorably entangled with a once virulent anti-Semite of Polish stock, Wanda Sue Possesski, who goes by the name of "Jinx" (a "possessed woman," a "jinx"?). Moishe Pipick has lost his physical manhood and can only have intercourse with his Polish inamorata with a mechanical penile implant. Even after he dies, Jinx Possesski continues to have intercourse with the corpse of Moishe Pipick and his mechanical penis. Moishe Pipick is not only the mouthpiece for but also the symbol of the diseased incarnation of the diseased imagination of Diaspora Jewry, impressively tumescent only through mechanical means, and through that sterile manhood pleasuring an anti-Semitic non-Jewish world before, during, and after his demise.

The reader of *Operation Shylock* need not, I believe, assume that the author Philip Roth has already packed or is about to pack his bags, move to Israel, and engage in espionage work. Within *Operation Shylock's* elaborately plotted and executed narrative, the reader comes to understand why and how the protagonist finally breaks free of his indecision and puts his future on the line for the country that provides a home for those who, like his friend Aharon Appelfeld, bear witness to the horrors of the Jewish past and the hope of the Jewish future.

For Philip Roth and for many of his colleagues, Israel is both an earthly Jewish state and also a state of mind in which one undertakes an evaluation of one's spiritual life. Indeed, when one looks at recent serious and popular American Jewish literature, it is striking how often these works use Israel as a spiritual site for the exploration of the most basic existential issues. As American Jews journey psychologically and physically to and from Israel, they wrestle with their own personal counterforces. Israel is the place where the American Jewish writers confront the counterlife; it has become the sacral center, if not the geographical center, of the American Jewish psyche.