

D O R O T :
The McGill
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Jewish Studies

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The cover illustration "Hashem Spoke" is based on the verse in Numbers 15:37-38:
"And Hashem spoke to Moses saying,
'Speak unto the children of Yisra'el, and bid them throughout their generations to make *tzitziyot* on the corners of their garments, and to put a blue cord in the *tzitzit* of the corners.'
Hashem wanted the Jews to look at the *tallit* and be reminded of all the commandments that he had given to Moses to give to the Jews.

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Preface

Ten years ago, a group of creative and entrepreneurial students decided to launch an undergraduate journal devoted to the publication of the best student scholarship produced through McGill's department of Jewish Studies. Last year, the editors aptly added a new title, *Dorot*. With this choice, they not only emphasize connections between several generations of students who have made their way through McGill's halls, but also underscore the scholarly connections established between the young writers who leave their mark on this journal and the historical moments and figures with whom they establish a dialogue through the topics of these essays.

On behalf of our department, we wish you continued success,

Dr. Yael Halevi-Wise
Acting Chair, Department of Jewish Studies

Introduction

This is my second year with the McGill Undergraduate Journal of Jewish Studies, and I am pleased and proud to represent the impressive scholarship contained here. In 2007, I acted as an assistant editor under the leadership of then editor-in-chief, Jeremy Pertman, and the journal appeared under a new, and rather fitting title, *Dorot*, meaning “generations” in Hebrew. The field of Jewish Studies draws upon a large spectrum of other disciplines such as history, anthropology, and comparative literature, to name a few. Nevertheless, these different approaches contribute towards a unifying purpose - to critically examine the many voices, or “generations,” of Judaism and Jewry. The very foundation of the “science” of Jewish Studies, it can be argued, is predicated on building upon the cultural, sociological, and philosophical works of the *dorot* that forged generations of scholarship. This diversity of academic backgrounds within Jewish Studies is reflected in our current journal - whether it is postmodern hermeneutical applications to classical *midrashim*, or the examination of the “Jewishness” of Charlie Chaplin in the works of the author Shalom Aleichem - our articles all draw upon a variety of fields and sources while engaging in specifically *Jewish* problems.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank and express my indebtedness to the *Dorot* team; my copy editor Marisa, and my two assistant editors, Ronen and Jonathan, who through their dedication and hard work have made this issue a reality and not simply a pile of scattered and coffee stained papers. In addition, the members of the Jewish Studies Student Association, as well as former JSSA President, Corey Shefman, were wonderfully supportive throughout the process. Finally, I wish to thank Prof. Halevi-Wise and everyone in the Jewish Studies Department for their help and guidance.

My journey with *Dorot* has been a challenging yet greatly rewarding endeavor, and with a sincere feeling of satisfaction, I present to you the tenth edition of *Dorot*.

Enjoy,

Adam Blander
Editor in Chief

The Divine-Human Interface in Midrashic Literature: A Second-Order Theopoetics of Jewish Belief

Sigal Samuel

Poets are nothing but representatives of the gods.

Plato, Ion

“Theopoetics is an emerging field of interdisciplinary study combining elements of poetic analysis, process theology, narrative theology, and postmodern philosophy” which proposes that theologians should try to find God through poetic re-appropriations of religious texts, or simply through poetry itself. In contrast to what Heidegger and Hopper would call “ontotheologic” approaches, which prioritize rational ‘truth’ and claim that we must always accept or reject asserted realities or truth-claims, theopoetics embraces ambiguity of meaning, “replaces certainty with Beauty and sureness with Art”. Moreover, theopoetics distinguishes itself from traditional biblical hermeneutics by its claim that divine texts can and should take on new meanings to reflect “the changing situation of the individual.”¹

What does a theopoetic work look like? By way of illustration, it may help the reader to consider the work of David L. Miller who, in 1989, wrote one of the founding texts of the theopoetic genre. In his book entitled *Hells & Holy Ghosts: A Theopoetics of Christian Belief*, Miller examines two of the most puzzling and incredible beliefs in the Christian tradition: the notion that Jesus journeyed to the interior of the earth after his death to a place called hell, and the idea that the dead live on in the form of ghosts. By tracing these twin notions all the way from the Bible through to the contemporary secular literature of Rilke and Henry James, Miller shows the enduring value and power of these Christian ideas even for writers and readers in the postmodern era. These ideas may not be significant

in the same way as they were for bygone believers, but their worth as cultural currency is not at all diminished by this shift in mindset; they are still the potent metaphors and symbols by which human consciousness is pervaded and shaped.

The topic that I propose to investigate in the present essay concerns a somewhat different matter – namely, the nature of the divine-human interface from the perspective of the Jewish tradition. For centuries, the common view has been that the relationship between God and humankind is, to a large extent, characterized by dependency. More specifically, it is most often presumed that the direction of that dependency runs from humans to God. Humans rely on God for creation, sustenance, hope, and so forth. However popular this conception may be, there is also another strain in the Jewish tradition, one which speaks of God's dependency on humankind. This trend suggests that it is God who relies on people for all the things just enumerated: creation, sustenance, hope. In what follows, it is this trend of thought that I shall examine in the Jewish tradition. Since the parameters of this essay confine me to a rather narrower field of inquiry than Miller was able to engage in his book on Christian belief, I shall limit myself to the exploration of this thought within two circumscribed fields: firstly, within the realm of midrashic literature (c. second century CE), and secondly, within the postmodern period.

The initial task of this essay will be to elucidate the relation of theopoetics to Ricoeur's theory of interpretation. While theopoetics grew primarily out of the work of Stanley Hopper and David L. Miller, and was popularized by Amos Niven Wilder, the basic ideas underlying the theopoetic approach are in a certain sense reminiscent of Ricoeur's thought, and thus merit thorough investigation.² Following this, I will discuss the genre of Midrash as an intrinsically theopoetic re-appropriation of biblical texts. Subsequently, I will discuss three midrashim which address the topic of the divine-human relationship in the Jewish tradition, as well as three postmodern (second-order) re-appropriations of these midrashim. Finally, I will address the implications of theopoetics as a hermeneutic strategy for readers and believers in the postmodern era.

Paul Ricoeur and the Surplus of Meaning

In *Interpretation Theory & the Surplus of Meaning*, Ricoeur discusses, and argues for, the openness of textual interpretation, offering a non-foundationalist approach to hermeneutics. His notion of the "surplus

of meaning” suggests that meaning transcends determinateness insofar as it is bound up with the inexhaustibility and arbitrariness of language. Because every word is “multiply located, possessing multiple significations and references, associations and implications,”³ there is always an excess, an unending “more” of meaningful possibilities. On a larger scale, the fact that every text is an intersection and overlap of other textual surfaces (a reality Kristeva would characterize by the term “intertextuality” and Bakhtin would refer to as “dialogism”) implies an indeterminate surplus of meaningful *interpretative* possibilities. That is, insofar as any text is unavoidably characterized by this fundamentally dialogic aspect, the illusion of its unity is transgressed, and the search for the absolutely “correct” interpretation is thereby rendered impossible. On this construal, the act of interpretation *simply* is the act of producing meaning from the semantic surplus of a text. Meanings are produced; they are not purely “recovered.”

But if there is no absolutely correct interpretation, does that imply that all meanings are equivalently improbable? Does Ricoeur’s notion of the “surplus of meaning” indicate that all meanings are created equal? If not, on what basis does a particular interpretation become legitimated over and against other interpretations?

Ricoeur details the answers to these questions in “What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding.” Following in the footsteps of Schleiermacher, Ricoeur posits a two-pronged anatomy of interpretation – namely, its subjective and objective aspects. The subjective dimension of interpretation involves the free appropriation of a text and the construction of its meaning on the basis of the individual interpreter’s own life perspective. In contrast to the hermeneutics issuing from Schleiermacher and Dilthey, which prioritize the recognition of an author’s intention from the perspective of the original addressees, Ricoeur states elsewhere:

Not the intention of the author, which is supposed to be hidden behind the text; not the historical situation common to the author and his original readers; not the expectations or feelings of these original readers [...] What has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text.⁴

Equally necessary, however, is the scrupulous appraisal of that perspective.

Since no reader approaches a text free of ideology, or without a vested interest in seeing a certain meaning emerge, Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of self-interpretation; that is, the reader's frank examination of the lenses which color his or her perception of a given text.

The objective dimension of interpretation acknowledges the need for a deep investigation into the linguistic features of a given text. The purpose of this examination is to ensure the validity of the interpretation vis-à-vis the language of the text itself. Thus, Ricoeur introduces critical checks from the perspective of the text as a means of imposing limits on understanding. All interpretations are not created equal in his view, but are rather legitimated or dismissed on the basis of the act of the text itself. "Appropriation loses its arbitrariness insofar as it is the recovery of that which is at work, in labour, within the text."⁷

Ricoeur's theory of interpretation has tremendous implications for religious studies and theopoetics. Firstly, his insistence on the autonomy of a given text, on its openness to new interpretations, constitutes an important statement with regard to the reading of theological texts. Ricoeur differs from more traditional hermeneuts and paves the way for modern theopoeists by freeing the meaning of religious texts from being fixed by authorial intention, as well as by their original communicative contexts and addressees. Fundamentally existential in nature, his conception of text-interpretation describes the reading process as having the radical potential to disclose new modes of being, new possible worlds. Perhaps more important than their "original" meaning, then, are the meanings that religious texts may open up for their readership. By allowing readers to discover in scriptural texts new meanings that have the potential to vitalize their religious lives in fresh, empowering ways, Ricoeur's view of interpretation liberates readers from viewing theological ideas as closed, static, rational truth-claims that must be either accepted or rejected. It allows them, instead, to view these ideas as doorways and windows which, through re-interpretation and re-appropriation, may open onto new vistas of religious experience. In other words, it invites them to read theopoetically.

This conception of texts as opening the way for experience is deeply rooted in Ricoeur's theory of interpretation. He says that "interpretation is completed as appropriation when reading yields something like an event."⁸ What type of event does Ricoeur have in mind? Elsewhere, he writes:

My deepest conviction is that poetic language alone restores to us that participation in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject. Hence the function of poetic discourse is to bring about this emergence of a depth-structure of belonging-to amid the ruins of descriptive discourse.⁹

Here, Ricoeur suggests that the function of poetic language is to return the reader to the state of being that precedes subject-object distinctions, the state that precedes the compulsion to make attributions of truth and falsity. The categorization of statements as true or false – indeed, the very tendency to conceive of statements as truth-claims to begin with – is predicated based on the subject’s understanding of him or herself as distinct from that statement. It relies on a conception of the statement as something that exists out there in the world, making it susceptible to “objective” categorizations such as truth, falsity, and the like. This idea finds voice in a passage by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, which bears a significant resemblance to the passage of Ricoeur’s just quoted.

A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I myself am involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as “a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity.”¹⁰

That which can be approached as a truth-claim, is that which Marcel calls a “problem.” Marcel’s definition of “mystery” as that which cuts beneath the subject-object distinction, and thus the truth-falsity distinction as well, fits perfectly with Ricoeur’s definition of poetic language. Thus, in Ricoeur’s view, poetic language is a mystery; it is not something to be accepted or rejected based on its rationality or truth-value, but something that is meant to bring us into an *experience* which is ontologically prior to truth-value. This is the experience of one’s personal implication and involvement in meaning – and, by extension, in the subjective production of meaning. This, I would argue, is the experience or “event” which Ricoeur says results when “interpretation becomes appropriation.” True

appropriation is rooted in the experience of meaning production. By interpreting religious discourse as poetic discourse – and thus as a site of the meaning-producing experience – theopoetics achieves just this type of appropriation.

Midrash and Theopoiesis

Midrash is a unique genre of Jewish literature that focuses on the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Homiletic (or aggadic) midrashim are concerned with the interpretation of non-legal passages, and employ a notable variety of exegetical methods in fleshing out the possible meanings of a text. This type of Midrash takes ambiguous verses as invitations for the production of more elaborate meaning, moving quickly from a specific textual problem to full-blown philosophical discussions, heated satires, or stories overlaid with moral messages. In fact, it often seems as if the textual anomalies in midrashim are merely serving as a springboard for rabbinic reflection and creative mythmaking. Oftentimes the Midrash has an agenda to push, be it the wish to open imaginations to some esoteric idea, or to inculcate a particular ethic in its audience. Thus, there is a strong argument to be made that the primary goal of Midrash is not to make exegetical truth-claims about the correct understanding of a biblical text, but to open up possible worlds or modes of being through the creative interpretation of that text. Midrashic work is not purely descriptive; it aims at a new experience, horizon of understanding, or way of situating oneself in life. Many Jewish authors stress that Midrash is not to be taken literally; rather, it is a self-consciously subjective re-appropriation of the biblical text that is meant to serve as a catalyst for thought, or as a key for initiation into spiritual and esoteric matters.

This link between theopoetics and Midrash has not gone unnoticed in scholarly circles. Scott Cairns, for example, compares Midrash to the theopoetic perspective insofar as “this perspective provides the consequent, Hebraic notion of a text as a made thing capable of further making.”¹¹ Insofar as it self-consciously claims “poetic license” in the meaningful interpretation and re-appropriation of biblical texts, Midrash may be deemed a theopoetic genre of writing.

My goal in the following section shall be to demonstrate some of the ways in which recent scholars, theologians, and hermeneuts have re-appropriated Midrash itself, thus engaging in what may be thought of as a second-order theopoetic endeavor. Worth emphasizing here is the

fact that these poetic re-readings are not necessarily relegated to poets alone, or to those who would regard themselves as doing theopoetic work; rather, in many cases they are being propagated by the technical and erudite work of scholars. In fact, the midrashim that I have selected for presentation below were chosen, to some degree, in virtue of the fact that they reflect the capacity of scholarship to generate this type of second-order theopoetics.

The Divine-Human Interface: Of Witnesses, Chariots and Firefighters

I. Humankind as God's Witnesses

In Sifrei Deuteronomy 346, we find the following startling passage:

"For I will call out in the name of the Lord" (Deut. 32:3). When I call out in His name He is great, and if not, *kivyakhol* etc. "And you are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God" (Isaiah 43:12). When you are my witnesses I am God, and when you are not my witnesses, *kivyakhol* I am not God. Similarly, "Unto you have I raised up mine eyes, You who sit in the heavens" (Psalms 123:1). Were it not for me, You would not be sitting in the heavens.

This passage is so shocking that it requires no elaboration. Clearly, it indicates that it is human recognition that constructs, and continually recreates, God's existence and supremacy. That is, God is only God insofar as people choose to bear witness to that fact. However, the meaning of the term *kivyakhol* could perhaps do with some critical attention. Most often translated to mean "as it were," *kivyakhol* has long been understood as the sign of an exegete's wish to piously qualify a particularly bold reading of Scripture or anthropomorphic/anthropopathic claim. Michael Fishbane has recently pointed out, however, that the term is not always meant as a qualifier; in some cases, as in patterns which take the structure *theologoumenon* followed by *kiv.* + proof-text, the term serves to mark a hermeneutical presumption that supports, and justifies, the radical theological assertion being drawn from the scriptural text.¹² According to this conception of the use of *kivyakhol*, the Midrash given above may in fact be stating what it seems to be stating, quite boldly and unabashedly.

This Midrash has long been a favourite source for liberally inclined

readers, and has been frequently co-opted to serve various agendas. Rabbi Isaac Hutner (commonly known as the *Pachad Yitzchak*) co-opted it in the context of a radically postmodern second-order appropriation, which he carefully disguised as a benign Rosh Hashanah sermon. Hutner (1906-1980) was an extremely unique case. He studied philosophy informally at the University of Berlin and became privy to the ideas of such figures as Heidegger and Wittgenstein; his Jewish writings reveal traces of these philosophers' ideas. However, as the leader of an Orthodox community in Brooklyn, Hutner felt the need to encode these radical (sometimes near-heretical) ideas, often using the term *kivvyakhol* to qualify their meaning and make his statements appear tame. Never did he cite the names of the philosophers from whom he was collecting his material. Through a close and educated reading of his texts, one may discern exactly what type of philosophical foundation his homiletics are based upon.

In the twenty-fourth article in his book on Rosh Hashanah, Hutner enlists the above-mentioned Midrash in what can only be described as a poststructuralist reading of Jewish ritual practices. Hutner sets out to explain why it is that one may not fulfill one's obligation to say *malkhuyot* (a specific set of Rosh Hashanah prayers that deals with the crowning of God as King) simply by saying the *Shema Yisrael*. Since the *Shema* contains the idea of accepting the yoke of God's Kingship, why should the recitation of this blessing not suffice to achieve the goal of reciting *malkhuyot* on Rosh Hashanah? Hutner explains that there is an important difference between *crowning* God as King (as in *malkhuyot*) and *accepting* God's Kingship (as in the *Shema*). While the latter has to do with the passive recognition of a fact which is already objectively established in the world, the former is an active construction and creation of that reality. On Rosh Hashanah, the goal is not simply to recognize that God is already King, but to make God King, to enthrone God through the power of one's own recognition – hence the insufficiency of reciting the *Shema* on that holiday.

In this homily, Hutner is picking up on the ideas of Roland Barthes and the poststructuralist thinkers thereafter. In the celebrated piece entitled "The Death of the Author," Barthes argues that the author is dead in the sense that we can no longer look to a text's author to establish the meaning of that text. In this displacement, or de-centering, the reader replaces the author as the primary source of meaning; it is the reader who constructs a text's meaning – and, one might say, constructs a text's author as well. In his piece on Rosh Hashanah, Hutner is making the same essential move: he is destabilizing God as center and constructor of

meaning, and arguing that it is we humans who construct meaning, and construct God, by choosing to bear witness to God's reality.

Interestingly, Barthes himself recognizes the link between denying the centrality of the author and denying the centrality of God. He argues that to refuse an author is to refuse to fix the meaning of a text, and "to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases."¹³ Yet in his homily, Hutner uses Barthes' de-centering critique of the author not to negate or abandon God, quite the contrary, to encourage the active and continual re-creation of God on the part of his human listeners. Thus, Hutner's re-appropriation here works on two levels: firstly, it reappropriates an already radical Midrash in the context of a poststructuralist critique; and secondly, it re-appropriates the poststructuralist critique such that it is not, as Barthes would have it, "anti-theological,"¹⁴ but is in fact an invitation to a profoundly theological pact in which the role of human beings becomes paramount.

II. Humankind as God's Chariot

In Genesis Rabbah 89:4, we find the following cryptic statement:

R. Johanan said: The wicked are established upon their gods, [as it says] "And Pharaoh dreamt and he was standing on the Nile." But the righteous, their gods are established upon them, [as it says] "And behold God stood over Jacob" (Genesis 28).

What are we to make of this strange Midrash? In what sense, exactly, is God "established" upon the righteous, and how does the verse concerning Jacob support this claim? The traditional and idiomatic reading of the Jacob verse suggests that God simply stood over Jacob, perhaps in the sense of keeping watch, while he slept at Bethel. However, this reading fails to explain why such a verse should be cited as a proof-text for the claim that "the righteous, their gods are established on them."

In *Biblical Myth & Rabbinic Mythmaking*, Michael Fishbane points out that this Midrash must be read in tandem with the famous dictum of R. Simeon ben Lakish, that, as stated in Genesis Rabbah 47:6, "The patriarchs are themselves the Chariot." The chariot spoken of here is the divine Chariot upon which God is enthroned and manifest, and incredibly, according to R. Simeon, it is the patriarchs themselves who constitute that

object! "Hence, when Scripture speaks of God ascending upon Abraham or Jacob, we have to understand that He was mounted upon their mythic form on high."¹⁵ Indeed, there is a rich mythology depicting Jacob's supernal countenance as a heavenly prototype of his earthly one, engraved upon the divine Chariot. Thus, the correct reading of the abovementioned Midrash is not "God stood *over* Jacob" but "God stood *upon* Jacob," in the very literal sense that God stood upon Jacob's mythic form in the heavens. This reading clarifies the connection between the Jacob verse and the assertion that "the righteous, their gods are established on them;" God is actually supported and sustained by Jacob in the sense that Jacob is a part of the divine Chariot itself.

Here, Fishbane's scholarly reading has the effect of reappropriating the Midrash of Genesis Rabbah 89:4 so that it supports, strengthens, and elucidates another (already radical) Midrashic statement, namely the claim that "the patriarchs are themselves the Chariot." In fact, Fishbane's interpretation of the Jacob Midrash actually intensifies the radical nature of the claim about the patriarchs and the divine Chariot. Had that claim stood alone, one might have understood that the patriarchal visages are simply features of the divine Chariot – there for ornamental, symbolic purposes, no more and no less. But given the statement in the Jacob Midrash that God is *established* upon the righteous, and given the connection between Jacob and the Chariot in other myths, we come to understand that the patriarchs are built into the Chariot in a much more interesting way. Not mere ornaments, they are actually constitutive of the Chariot's structure. Insofar as the Chariot supports God, this reading suggests that it is none other than righteous human beings who have the crucial task – and honor – of bearing aloft their God.

III. Humankind as God's Firefighters

In the midrashic proem of Genesis Rabbah 39:1, we find the following parable concerning the call of Abraham:

R. Isaac said: This may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place, when he saw a *birah* burning. He said, "Might you say that the *birah* is without a leader?" The owner of the *birah* looked out at him and said, "I am the owner of the *birah*." Similarly, because our father Abraham had said, "Might you say that the world

is without a leader?" the Holy One, blessed be He, looked out at him and said, "I am the owner of the world."¹⁶

For many years, the tendency of believers and secular scholars alike has been to read this parable in light of Maimonides' portrayal of the call of Abraham, which has that forefather discover monotheism through the powers of his own rational intellect. Indeed, until quite recently the traditional reading of this Midrash has understood the Hebrew word *doleket*, translated here as "burning," to mean "lit up." Furthermore, it has read the word *birah* to mean a great and beautiful palace. The result of this reading is to suggest that what the passerby sees is a wondrous palace, all lit up from within, abandoned yet glowing warmly in the night; this leads the passerby (Abraham) to ask rhetorically, "Could it be that this palace is without a leader?" Put simply, this reading depicts the call of Abraham as nothing other than the teleological argument for the existence of God. While this reason-based interpretation works well with the Maimonidean view, and with the views of certain early commentaries, philologically speaking it is not necessarily the better reading.

In his 1994 article entitled "The Call of Abraham: A Midrash Revisited," Paul Mandel challenges the traditional reading of the puzzling poem given above. By pointing out four crucial philological facts, he changes the entire reading of the parable:

- 1) Mandel points out that the word *doleket* never indicates anything other than fire in rabbinic literature; thus, the "lit up" translation of the early commentaries is shown to be fallacious.
- 2) Secondly, he proves that the curious word *birah* refers not to a palace (for which the common word is *palatin*, or *paltorin*), but to a large building in which people generally lived in separate apartments. The description of the *birah* in rabbinic literature corresponds perfectly to the *insula* of Roman architecture, where *insulae* were large tenement houses containing several private dwellings.
- 3) While *insulae* were usually owned by a single individual, the landlords often delegated the supervision of the property to a principal tenant or promoter. The tenant's job entailed on-site management, including the need to organize the tenants in case of the outbreak of fire. This fact helps explain a subtle shift in the

language of the proem: the passerby asks about a leader (*manhig*), but the response given concerns an owner (*ba'al ha-birah*). Reading *birah* as *insula* thus helps us understand why the passerby inquires as to the whereabouts of the building's leader. Why it is the owner who answers remains to be seen.

4) Lastly, Mandel points out that the words *hetzitz alav*, translated above as "looked out at him," should actually be translated as "looked down at him," given that the usage of these words always connotes a looking down from above. This suggests that at the time of his response to the passerby the owner of the *birah* must be located either on the upper stories of the building or on the roof.

On the basis of these points, Mandel concludes that what the passerby stumbles upon is actually a scene of destruction and despair. An apartment building is going down in flames, there is no manager to help organize the tenants, and the owner of the building is standing at the top, crying, "I am the owner!" On this construal, the owner's cry can only be understood as a plea for help, implying "'You, who have stopped to look for a manager – there is none! [...] Be you the manager, and save me and my building!'"¹⁷ When we apply this reading to the parable's second half, we see that "the call of Abraham becomes a call to Abraham."¹⁸ God (the owner of the world) is calling Abraham to action, pleading that he attenuate the discord and conflagration among the world's "tenants" and put out the "fire" that threatens to consume humankind – and God as well! Since the owner of the *birah* is himself depicted as standing on the roof of the burning building, the reader must understand that God, too, is in danger of being destroyed along with the destruction of the world. As Mandel notes, "God's call is the cry of a God who is Himself in danger."¹⁹ In this reading, it is God who, quite clearly, is dependent on the action of human beings for God's own survival and wellbeing. The great implication of this parable – as re-appropriated by Mandel – is that people have the power to save not only themselves from death, but to save God as well.

Implications for Postmodern Readers

The initial goal of this essay was to show how theopoetics grew out of Ricoeur's theory of interpretation in general, and out of his

notion of a surplus of meaning in particular. In so doing, I pointed out that Ricoeur's theory involves both subjective and objective aspects of interpretation. While theo-poets most often spotlight the open, subjective side of Ricoeur's theory as that which roots their hermeneutic strategy, it is interesting to note that the erudite and technical work of academics can also foster theo-poetics from the objective side. As scholars such as Fishbane and Mandel demonstrate, the critical checks imposed by the act of the text itself can often "constrain" reading in a manner that gives rise to the most profoundly liberating and meaningful interpretations of all. Postmodern readers who embrace the subjective aspect of interpretation would therefore do well to note that sometimes the most radical and potent readings of a text are the ones that are suggested by the original language of the text itself. The technical analyses of philological scholarship can actually serve theo-poetic ends by helping to uncover the poetry that is gestured at by the details of the language. Reaping the full benefits of both the subjective and objective dimensions of Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, postmodern readers and believers should find themselves better equipped to rediscover themselves as the makers and guardians of meaning, old and new.

End Notes

- 1 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theopoetics> , and <http://www.theopoetics.net> which has been of tremendous help in writing this essay and which has informed it to a great degree.
- 2 My sincere thanks to Callid Keefe-Perry for bringing this important point to my attention.
- 3 Stephen D. Ross, *The Limits of Language* (NY: Fordham University Press, 1994), p. 22.
- 4 Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse & the Surplus of Meaning* (Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 92.
- 5 Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 164.
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The Persistence of Orthodoxy

Joshua Libben

Introduction

Many interesting topics in an academic discipline can be found in areas where the majority of theorists predicted the occurrence of a certain phenomenon and the opposite in fact took place. Such was the case in the realm of political science and international relations in the early 1990s. The realist theoretical paradigm, which had held significant sway for much of the twentieth century, predicted an indefinite continuation of the Cold War. The end of the war and the fall of the Berlin Wall precipitated several important changes within the discipline, undermining the authorities of certain theoretical paradigms and giving rise to new ones. As Richard Lebow, critic of realism and political scientist noted: “the dramatic events of 1989-1991 are widely recognized to have ushered in a new era in international relations.”¹

Similarly, in earlier decades significant consensus was made in the realm of Jewish sociological studies that Jewish Orthodoxy, as a denomination and a sociological group, would severely decline in the decades to come. This was seen by many as inevitable. An increase in modernization would be assumed to correlate with a decrease in general religiosity. Writing in 1978, Jewish historian Max Dimont felt that “purist Orthodoxy in America is in an untenable position,”² pressures from the right and the left would tear the denomination apart. In a similar, but earlier sentiment, Marshall Sklare wrote the following about Orthodoxy in his American account of *Conservative Judaism*: “The history of their movement in this country can be written in terms of a case study of institutional decay.”³ Such an argument, which has been termed the “secularization thesis,”⁴ about the decline of Orthodoxy was not limited to Judaism, but rather was predicted for most religions throughout the world. Social and philosophical theorists perceived an age of secular religion and liberal mentality. Fundamentalist Christians and Muslims

were deemed to be caught up in the past, unable to adapt to the realities of the modern Western World. Up until the 1990s, declarations such as the one Fukuyama made about the impending “end of history” were accepted by many academics, who were convinced of the “bloodless worldwide triumph of (secular) democratic capitalism.”⁵ Likewise, in Judaism, there was a clear sense that the future of the religion was in the modern Reform or Conservative movements, not in the old ways of Orthodoxy.

Despite these social scientific predictions, Orthodox Jews as a social group continue to be extremely resilient to the pressure of modernization and assimilation. Far from disappearing, Orthodoxy remains very important as a part of Judaism in North America. The aim of this paper is to examine the possible reasons why the predictions of these sociologists did not come to fruition. It will become evident that the persistence of Orthodoxy is not limited to the Jewish religion, nor is it the result of some characteristic unique to the Jewish Orthodox believer. Instead, the continuing existence and strength of Jewish orthodoxy is simply a case study for the larger persistence of religious Orthodoxy in general. The argument made is that Orthodox peoples have certain traits and social practices which connect them across the boundaries of religion, and that these practices continue to have a place in modern society. Orthodoxy of all kinds is continuing to hold sway in religious circles, not merely within Judaism. The persistence of Orthodoxy within Judaism is not a function of Judaism itself, but rather a greater indicator of the continuing importance that a strong sense of religion plays in the lives of many modern people.

Who are the Jewish Orthodox?

Before displaying the evidence which indicates that Orthodox Jews continue to flourish as a group, it is important to clearly describe what is meant here by orthodoxy. In this paper, the theological differences between the denominations of Judaism will be given less attention than the differences in social practice between the groups. Religiosity and social practice are often strongly interconnected within the Jewish faith. Emphasis in Judaism is placed on action in accordance to religious law, as opposed to emphasis placed on belief, as in religions such as Christianity. An orthodox Jew is defined by his or her strict adherence to the *halacha*, the combined directives of biblical, Talmudic, and rabbinic law. Sociologically, orthodox Jews are those whose Jewish identity plays the most prominent role in their daily lives and actions, relative to Conservative or Reform Jews.

Although for most studies, denomination is self-identified, adherence to *halacha* and heavy religiosity is largely correlated with one's declaration of Orthodoxy. For example, it was found that eighty-seven percent of Jews who identified themselves as Orthodox kept a Kosher home, as opposed to about forty percent of Conservative Jews and only six percent of Reform.⁶ Therefore, Orthodox Jews can be sociologically defined as those whose interactions and daily routine involve the greatest influence from religion and religious law.

It is important to remember that in any given community, within both the United States and Canada, Orthodox Jews make up a relatively small portion of the Jewish population. In their 1979 analysis of the social profile of American Jewish denominations, Lazerwitz and Harrison found that according to the National Jewish Population Survey of 1971, eighteen percent of all synagogue members identified themselves as Orthodox; among Jews who did not attend synagogue, that number was as low as seven percent.⁷ As a result, when the persistence of Orthodoxy is considered in this paper, it should be noted that this resilience to modernization and secularism has not translated into a wave of new membership for denomination. As we shall see, the membership of Jewish Orthodoxy has not increased in any significant way over the previous decades. What is being explored here is the need for a minority, not a majority, of the general population to live a spiritually and socially religious life, despite the advent of modernity.

The Persistence of Jewish Orthodoxy in America

Now that the subject matter has been clearly identified, we can turn to the evidence that the Orthodox denomination of Judaism is not, in fact, waning in the United States. The American census is prohibited from asking questions of religion, and therefore is not a tool available to Jewish studies. Religious studies instead must rely on the use of sample surveys. The first, and most critical, piece of evidence regarding the persistence of American Jewish Orthodoxy is, of course, whether the percentage of Jews who identify themselves as Orthodox has changed since Lazerwitz and Harrison's study in 1979. In order to discover this, we can once again look at the National Jewish Population Survey, which was last taken in 2000-2001. Of the total survey population who identified themselves as Jewish, ten percent consider themselves Orthodox, which is in fact *more* than the seven percent found during the 70s. In the past three decades,

the population of synagogue members who identify as Orthodox has risen three points, from eighteen to twenty-one percent. These are not massive increases in membership considering that even among regular templegoers the number of Reform and Conservative Jews are significantly higher, at thirty-nine and thirty-three percent respectively. However, the data certainly does not indicate the disappearance of American Jewish Orthodoxy that many sociologists had predicted.

Even more telling than the increase in the Orthodox community is the current make-up of the Jewish Orthodox population. According to the National Jewish Population Survey, the Orthodox denomination is significantly younger than the average Jewish population. The survey indicates that almost half of all Orthodox Jews are under the age of 44, with the largest population residing in the 18-34 age range. By comparison, the Reform and Conservative denominations are significantly older. This is something that the secularization thesis cannot account for. Had the membership of Orthodoxy been predominantly older, a secularization theorist would be able to argue that, while the forces of modernity are influencing younger Jews towards less traditional denominations, such as Reform, the older population retains an old-world mentality. However, the evidence indicates that the primary source of Orthodox membership is the youth, who would presumably be most in tune with modernity.

Canadian Orthodoxy

An argument could be made that the data above only indicates the persistence of Orthodoxy in America, and thus there could be specific factors which allow Orthodox Judaism to thrive in the United States, but not in other developed countries. For this reason, it is important to look at the status of Canadian Jewish Orthodoxy to see if it can be said that Orthodox Jews continue to thrive in North America. As noted above, the United States census is unable to take measures of religion into its account of the American population. The Canadian census, on the other hand, has included questions of religion since 1901. Unfortunately, for our purpose the census is currently restricted to the major religious categories, and does not include questions regarding the specific denominations within a faith. Historically, the issue of ensuring that all traditional and Orthodox Jews are counted in censuses is also important, since many adhere to the biblical prohibition against Jews being counted. As such, on the issue of Jewish Orthodoxy in Canada, we must once again turn to surveys.

The United States and Canada have always differed in terms of Jewish demographics. The minority status of Jews in Canada is far greater than in America, where not only the absolute number of Jews, but also the percentage, is significantly higher. Despite, or perhaps because of this relative disparity in population, Canadian Jewry has always been significantly more orthodox than Jewry in the United States. It was found in the 1970s that thirty-five percent of all Canadian Jews were of the Orthodox denomination, as compared to twenty percent of American congregations in the same period.⁸ Based on a report by the NJPS in 2000-2001, thirty percent of Canadian Jews continue to be Orthodox, despite pressures of secularization within Canada. It is evident, then, that the persistence of Orthodoxy is not limited to the United States alone.

Changes in Jewish Orthodoxy

Jewish Orthodoxy appears to have continued to prosper in North America, despite the predictions of secularization theorists. However, an argument could be made that, though a certain segment of the population continues to identify themselves as Orthodox Jews, what it means to be Orthodox has changed in recent decades. If Orthodoxy has become increasingly secular, and the entire Jewish denominational spectrum has shifted towards secularism, then the arguments of the secularization theory could still be valid. The question that then arises is: are Orthodox Jews becoming less orthodox?

The answer to this question is no. The data shows that Orthodox Jews are just as traditional, religious, and observant as ever. In 1971, the first ever National Jewish Population Survey found that eighty-seven percent of Orthodox Jews kept a kosher home, and fifty-one percent of them attended synagogue frequently.⁹ Using the same standards of measurement, the 2000-2001 NJPS found that eighty-six percent of Orthodox Jews still keep a Kosher home, and fifty-eight percent attend synagogue on a frequent basis. Once again, the role of the youth in Orthodox communities strongly refutes some of the notions of the secularization thesis. It was found in 2000-2001 that day school education among Orthodox youth has become normative, in a manner that did not exist when the older generation was young. The NJPS found that, with only nineteen percent of traditionalist Jews over 65 having attended day school, ninety-one percent of the most recent day school generation, aged 6-17, had attended. While clearly some areas of Orthodoxy have modernized in the past three decades, the main

indicators of religious identity among traditionally Orthodox Jews has remained stable.

This is not to say that no changes have occurred in the realm of Orthodoxy in the past few decades. Famously, the same study in 2000-2001 found that, since the 1970s, attitudes towards intermarriage have changed drastically. From a starting point at merely one percent, intermarriage rates among Orthodox Jews peaked in the late 1980s at ten percent, before leveling off to a rate of five percent in the current period. These rates remain far lower than that of the average national Jewish population. The Orthodox community has also undergone some other important social changes in the last half-century. Etan Diamond's *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* examines the movement of the Orthodox community out of their traditional haven in the inner cities of America, starting in the late 1950s. Many theorists perceived this movement to be precipitation of the modernization of Orthodox Jewry. Without the close ties and old-world life style offered by Jewish communities in the heart of New York, Montreal, and Toronto, traditional Jews would be forced to secularize, ensuring a strong future for Reform Judaism. Diamond holds, however, that the Orthodox population has been able to successfully transplant their communities into suburban ghettos, complete with kosher delis and Jewish Community Centers. This transplant, he argues, has had little affect on the religious intensity of the population. Diamond looks at the example of religious holidays and the Sabbath, where secularization theorists would argue that the remoteness of suburban communities would force Orthodox Jews to sacrifice their prohibition on driving. Instead, Diamond notes, "Orthodox Jews turn their neighborhood – their *place* – into a walking village."¹⁰ Such a phenomenon provides additional evidence of Orthodox Judaism's ability to withstand the forces of modernization without sacrificing religiosity.

Trends in Other Religions

The primary argument here is that the persistence of Jewish Orthodoxy is not the result of some unique characteristic that has allowed Orthodox Jews to combat the pressures of secularization and assimilation. Rather, it is correlated with the continuing existence of orthodoxy of all kinds in modern society. This argument hinges upon the assumption that there are significant commonalities between those people who live according to religious dogma, irrespective of the message of that dogma.

In a sociological sense, Orthodox Jews have more in common with Fundamentalist Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims than they do with the other denominations of Judaism.

What is meant here by religious orthodoxy is fairly similar to the definition of Jewish Orthodoxy presented earlier. Orthodoxy is synonymous with fundamentalism to the extent that it represents a core belief of values that permeate every social aspect of a religious community. In 1976, professor of theology Gary Quinn and professor of sociology James Davidson published an article on the various meanings of orthodoxy. According to them, orthodoxy falls into several distinct categories. The orthodoxy of Judaism involves, as has been mentioned, the practice of the Torah. Similarly, Evangelical Protestant sects look towards *The Fundamentals* of Luther, or some derivation thereof, for social guidance. The orthodoxy of Roman Catholicism, by contrast, is largely focused on institutional authority, while Eastern Orthodox Christianity is largely liturgical. To the Judeo-Christian centric analysis of Davidson and Quinn, I would add Islamic fundamentalism, which relies on the Qur'an and Sharia Law, as the other major form of orthodoxy in North American life.

Despite the idea stemming from many theological authorities that there exists no "single understanding of orthodoxy acceptable to all,"¹¹ there are certain basic social commonalities between strongly religious people, regardless of theological differences. First and foremost, all fundamentalist forms of religion struggle with the pressures of modernization and secularization, which they resist and view as a threat to their way of life. This struggle corresponds with a host of social issues that any orthodox community must contend with. Though the members of these communities may respond to these issues in different ways, and at different stages, the process is much the same. One of the more prominent issues of modernization is the place that women have among orthodox groups within their respective religions. Jewish Orthodoxy continues to prohibit females from becoming rabbis, despite the fact that Reform Judaism has embraced the notion of female religious leaders. Likewise, the Catholic Church prohibits women from attending seminary, and fundamentalist Islam contains no female Imams. Evangelical Protestantism has been more lenient on the issue, with certain sects and congregations accepting female ministers, while others continue to support only male pastors. Christel Manning investigated this cross-religious phenomenon in her book *God Gave Us the Right*, an analysis of the struggle between

Judeo-Christian orthodoxy and feminism. In this book, James Hunter was quoted as asserting that the common issues faced within these orthodox traditions “cuts across the old lines of conflict, making distinctions that long divided Americans – those between Protestants, Catholics and Jews – virtually irrelevant.”¹² These issues socially bind orthodox or fundamentalist peoples, irrespective of faith.

One of the areas in which the cross-religious connection between orthodox believers is most apparent is in voting behaviour. Despite the fact that Jews tend to be generally liberal in their voting behaviors in both Canada and the United States, Orthodox Jewry is consistently more conservative. As Levey noted, “among American Jews conservatism is less a product of affluence than it is of Orthodox religious adherence.”¹³ Among Protestant and Catholic communities in the United States, a similar phenomenon is found. Those who are more religious are consistently more likely to vote conservatively on the political spectrum, more so than their less religious counterparts within the same faith. The result of this has been a concurrence among orthodox peoples of different religions on a number of critical political values. In their staunch support for Israel, their remaining opposition to intermarriage, and their recent support for religious education, Orthodox Jews can find similar minded people among the strongly religious members of Protestantism, Catholicism, and for a lesser range of issues (excluding Israel), among Islam.

The General Persistence of Orthodoxy

The continuing prevalence of Orthodox Judaism does not result from a characteristic of, or a change within, the traditional Jewish faith. It cannot be credited to the heavily religious Jewish community alone. Rather, it is a case study, a result of a larger social force which has preserved religious orthodoxy despite the pressures of modernization. There has been no secular “end of history” in the recent decades. To the contrary, we have witnessed a resilience of faith in the modern era among certain members of the population. There is significant evidence that this resilience exists in all the major faiths of North America.

Harold Himmelfarb and Michael Loar conducted a sociological test of the validity of this polarization hypothesis among Jews, with interesting results. As the authors put it, “there has been a resurgence of fundamentalism at the same time that there has been an increase in the proportion of Jews who consider themselves non-denominational.”¹⁴

The results of their statistical testing were mixed. It was found that Orthodoxy was not losing members to secularization.¹⁵ However, it was also not gaining the numbers that would be expected of a true polarization. Himmelfarb and Loar's conclusion therefore, was that, while the phenomenon could not really be called polarization *per se*, Orthodox Judaism was not facing the assimilation predicted in the past. In short, some members of Judaism were embracing modernization and rejecting denominationalism, continuing to place religion as an important part of their lives despite the forces of modernization. Himmelfarb and Loar are correct in hesitating to call this trend "polarization." Instead, it is better seen as a resilience of Orthodoxy for certain members of the population.

This trend of resilience appears to be evident in Protestantism as well, which provides the best basis for comparison with Judaism, being the most prominent religious group in North America. Beginning in the mid 1970s, theorists began to notice a distinct move away from the traditionally mainstream Protestant denominations. On the one hand, many Protestants were "modernizing" their religion, embracing smaller, more liberal forms of Protestantism, or abandoning dogmatic denominationalism altogether. On the other hand, a significant portion of Protestants joined more "fringe groups," such as Mormons and Sectarians. These groups, Himmelfarb and Loar argue, "manifest an even greater fundamentalist tendency than mainline conservative denominations."¹⁶ These movements have been indicative of a response to modernity that many did not foresee. Rather than resulting in the gradual disappearance of orthodox and fundamentalist sects, as several predictions held would occur, the process of modernization resulted in polarizing the religious spectrum, causing some to become more secular, but others to embrace a greater amount of religion in their social lives.

The other primary religions of North America, Islam and Catholicism, have undergone a similar process in recent years. The topic of the polarization of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism is a controversial one, because of the ties that some see between greater Islamic religiosity and terrorism. Regardless of one's position on that particular issue, it is clear to see that fundamentalism of various faiths has not disappeared in North America in the face of modernization. In Canada, the 2002 Ethic Diversity Survey, run by Statistics Canada, found that fifty-three percent of the population engages in religious practices monthly, and twenty-nine percent of the population remains highly religious.¹⁷ In the United States, the numbers are even more prominent. In his book

The Persistence of Faith, Jonathan Sacks investigates the survival of orthodox beliefs in modernity, noting that “the Sea of Faith has never retreated, nor has there been a turn of the tide.”¹⁸ This fits with the evidence of the continuing, but not massively increasing, membership of Orthodox Judaism and Evangelical Protestantism. Sacks attributes this persistence to the role that religion plays for certain people, filling a hole that modernity cannot. Whatever psychological or social reason for it, evidence indicates that communities and denominations with a strong, traditional sense of religion continue to play a significant role in modern society.

Conclusion

If one remembers the quote given by Marshall Sklare in 1955, he described the inexorable decay of the Orthodox Jewish institution. Decades after, Sklare was forced to reconsider the status of Orthodox Jewry. “Unaccountably,” Sklare wrote, “(Orthodoxy) has transformed itself into a growing force in American Jewish life.”¹⁹ This transformation is accountable, but only if one looks to the forces affecting society at large, rather than limiting the scope of investigation to Judaism alone. If the scope is expanded, it becomes evident that there exists a persistence of orthodoxy and fundamentalist beliefs throughout the various religions of North America. This persistence in orthodoxy could exist in spite of a greater movement towards secularization by the less traditional members of a religion, and it could well be a response to that phenomenon. Regardless of the reason, it is obvious that the relationship between modernity and orthodoxy is not a simple dichotomy, with an increase in the former necessitating a decrease in the latter. Rather, the social dimensions of orthodoxy, both within and outside the Jewish faith, are considerably more complex than could have been predicted decades ago.

End Notes

1 Richard Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism,” *International Organization* 48.2 (Spring 1994): p. 249.

2 Max Dimont, *The Jews in America: The Roots, History, and Destiny of American Jews* (Olmstead Press, 2001), p. 182.

- 3 Harold Himmelfarb and Michael Loar, "National Trends in Jewish Ethnicity: A Test of the Polarization Hypothesis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23.2 (June 1984): p. 141.
- 4 Stephen Sharot, "Judaism and the Secularization Debate," *Sociological Analysis* 52.3 (1991): p. 255.
- 5 Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith: religion, morality and society in a secular age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991) Preface, p. 1.
- 6 Bernard Lazerwitz and Michael Harrison, "American Jewish Denominations: A Social and Religious Profile," *American Sociological Review* 44.4 (1979): p. 662, Table 3.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 658.
- 8 Stuart Shoenfeld, "The Jewish Religion in North America: Canadian and American Comparisons," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 3.2 (1978): p. 213, Table 1.
- 9 Lazerwitz and Harrison, p. 662, Table 3.
- 10 Etan Diamond, *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000) p. 153.
- 11 James D. Davidson and Gary J. Quinn, "Theological and Sociological Uses of the Concept Orthodoxy," *Review of Religious Research* 18.1 (1976): p.74.
- 12 Christel Manning, *God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism* (Rutgers University Press, 1999) p. 36.
- 13 Geoffrey Levy, "The Liberalism of American Jews – Has it been Explained?" *British Journal of Political Science* 26.3 (July 1996): p. 396.
- 14 Himmelfarb and Loar, p. 141.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 17 Warren Clark and Grant Schellenberg, "Who's Religious?" *Ethnic Diversity Survey*. (Statistics Canada, 2002), p. 3.
- 18 Sacks, p. 1.
- 19 Himmelfarb and Loar, p. 141.

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The First Century Synagogue

Madison Robins

The synagogue, as we know it today, is the central institution in Jewish religious worship. However, this was not always the case. The rise of the synagogue in the first few centuries of the Common Era has long been shrouded in conjecture and assumption, often linked without real examination, to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, and the growing influence of the Pharisees-turned-Rabbis in the decades and centuries afterward. Perhaps even more pervasive was the notion that the synagogue emerged in exilic circumstances as a result of distance from the Temple. In the past ten years, great strides have been made in the field of synagogue research; I believe a consensus has finally begun to emerge, based on extant sources, archaeology, and social-scientific methods as opposed to assumption and arguments from silence. In this paper, I will explore the search for origins as reflected in three recent monographs on the ancient synagogue and offer a comprehensive description of the synagogue as it appeared and functioned in first century Palestine.

In order to begin our examination, first we must be clear about how we will define the institution of the synagogue. In Anders Runesson's work, *The Origins of the Synagogue*, he defines four aspects to which most referred when searching for synagogue origins. These are the institutional, liturgical, non-liturgical, and spatial dimensions.¹ Keeping this in mind, our working definition of the synagogue, as it appears in the first century, is: a synagogue is a central assembly space for a village, town, city, or community (spatial), where administrative and legal proceedings take place (non-liturgical), Torah-reading and Sabbath observance are located (liturgical), and whose importance as the central institution of the local Jewish community is acknowledged by both pagan and Jewish authorities (institutional). Important to note is what I have left out of my definition: namely the condition that a synagogue be a distinct and recognizable building and that prayer take place there. It is also not required that the institution be referred to as a "συναγωγή" by our sources. This requirement has been used, not altogether successfully, by Howard Kee in "Defining

the First-Century CE Synagogue: Problems and Progress” in order to claim that the synagogue-as-building did not emerge until after the destruction of the Temple. In fact, by rejecting the manifold evidence referring to the synagogue as a “προσευχη,” a “place of prayer,” as well as his insistence that “συναγωγή” refers to an assembly of people, and not an institution in all first-century sources, Kee obscures the search for origins.² Thus, in this examination, προσευχη will be assumed as the standard Diasporic designation for the synagogue institution, and all instances of συναγωγή will be carefully examined in context to determine whether Kee may be correct in translating the word as “gathering,” or whether we can discern if the reference is, in fact, to an actual synagogue institution.³ Other terms for “synagogue” will be explained as they appear in source texts.

The sources for the synagogue prior to 70 CE are limited and diffuse. In many of the previous attempts at describing the synagogue before the destruction of the Temple far too much reliance was placed in post-70 CE Rabbinic descriptions, leading to the assumption that the pre-70 CE synagogue was wholly continuous with the later Rabbinic institution. This is an extension of assumptions that the Rabbis were continuous with the Pharisees and that the Pharisees controlled the synagogues in first century Galilee. In reality, however, the Pharisees had little or nothing to do with the pre-70 CE synagogue in any sort of leadership capacity, liturgical, administrative, or doctrinal.⁴ Thus, all Rabbinic sources must be examined with a very careful eye towards anachronism, and, unfortunately, the majority of the information must be rejected if an honest picture of the pre-70 CE synagogue is to emerge. Our textual sources are therefore limited to allusions in Pseudo-Philo and Josephus, as well as critical readings of New Testament and Hellenistic Jewish texts. Our task is helped considerably by archeological and inscriptional sources, however. Many inscriptions from προσευχη have been discovered in Egypt, and when considered alongside the Theodotos inscription from Jerusalem, much can be gleaned regarding the function and prestige of the synagogue in late antiquity. Furthermore, archeological discoveries of first century synagogues at Gamla, Masada, and Herodium, and possible discoveries at Qiryat Sefer, Jericho, Qumran, and Capernaum contribute greatly to our knowledge of synagogue architecture and thus, function. With these considerations in mind, we can begin an analysis of previous and current theories regarding synagogue origins.

Three recent monographs on synagogue origins, Donald Binder’s *Into the Temple Courts*, Lee Levine’s *The Ancient Synagogue*, and Anders

Runesson's *The Origins of the Synagogue*, all take the position that a concrete inauguration moment for the synagogue cannot be located. Instead, they see the synagogue as an emerging and developing institution, evolving from an earlier institution or situation, instead of being something wholly new. Though each of these scholars roots the synagogue in a different model, fundamentally they all assert the same thing: that the synagogue emerged slowly throughout the Hellenistic period, and its evolutions in the Diaspora and in Judea were parallel, yet distinct. I will begin this section with a brief overview of the history of synagogue origin research, followed by a summary of the views expressed by the three contemporary scholars mentioned above.

The origins of the synagogue have been proposed in virtually every time period for which there is evidence of Jewish/Israelite worship. Lee Levine points to four considerations which form the basis for origin hypotheses: 1) determining a major event which caused the formation of a new institution; 2) finding a Biblical passage which describes a "proto-synagogue" institution; 3) taking the absence of data to propose a late date of origin; and 4) following only hard evidence.⁵ Each of these considerations can be linked to a specific theory, and thus, instead of proceeding chronologically through Israelite history, I will proceed topically, based on the considerations laid out by Levine.

The most popular and wide-spread theory of synagogue origins is a result of the deprivation argument, which states that "the origins of the 'synagogue' is, in one way or another, seen as a response to the deprivation of religious activities caused by some form of the absence of the Jerusalem Temple."⁶ Most commonly, this results in a hypothesis that the synagogue originated in the Babylonian exile. This can already be seen in the Babylonian Talmud interpretation of Ezekiel 11:16 and in the Targum Jonathan to Judges 5:9, which states that the teachers of Israel "were sitting in the synagogues at the head of the exiles and were teaching the people the words of the law."⁷ Other major events which have been pointed to as inaugurating the new institution of the synagogue are the Torah reading rituals described in Nehemiah 8,⁸ the Josianic reform,⁹ the persecutions of King Manasseh,¹⁰ and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE.¹¹ The search for synagogue origins in the Biblical text most commonly results in pin-pointing the Torah reading of Ezra in Nehemiah 8 as the beginning of the synagogue institution. In much of modern scholarship, Ezra has taken the place of Moses as the inaugurator of the synagogue, based on an understanding of the primary, and best attested, activity of the institution

as being the reading and exposition of scripture.¹² The practice of taking the absence of evidence to suggest a very late date for synagogue origins has largely been a backlash against the highly uncritical assumption of exilic origins. Scholars such as Lester Grabbe argue that the absence of pre-Maccabean sources for the Palestinian synagogue indicates a post-Maccabean phenomenon.¹³ P.V.M. Flesher argues that there is silence in virtually all pre-70 CE sources, with the exception of Philo, Josephus, and the New Testament, with regards to Palestinian synagogues, and in all sources with regards to Judean synagogues, thus suggesting a very late date for the institution.¹⁴ Finally, theories based on only hard evidence, such as those posited by Heather McKay in *Sabbath and Synagogue*, and Howard Kee, typically posit dates corresponding to archeological evidence, leading to third century BCE dates for Egyptian synagogues and late first century CE dates for the Palestinian institution.¹⁵

However, while these hypotheses claim to be based only on hard evidence, they frequently disregard literary sources by labeling them “anachronistic” without proper critical analysis, and even question the identification of archeological discoveries as “synagogues.” While Kee and McKay have made it clear that uncritical examination of post-70 CE sources leads to poorly thought out hypotheses, their own hyper-critical attitude “has been convincingly repelled because almost no sound arguments were used.”¹⁶ Scholarship over the past ten years, reflected by Binder, Levine, and Runesson, has learnt from its predecessors that both uncritical and hyper-critical analysis of the texts leads to false views. A new, social-scientific approach must be utilized in order to determine, not the origins of the synagogue, but its emergence and evolution over time.

Donald Binder’s dissertation, *Into the Temple Courts*, examines the relationship between the Temple and the synagogue as it existed in both Palestine and the Diaspora. His work is based on his analysis of the activities and functions of the Second Temple courts, which he then links to the activities and functions of the Second Temple synagogue. This does not suggest how or when the synagogues in Palestine and the Diaspora came into being, but rather attempts to describe how they were understood by Jews and Gentiles in the Greco-Roman period. In a similar manner to Lee Levine, Binder suggests that the Temple took on a myriad of functions, just like those of pagan temples, as a consequence of Hellenization, particularly with regards to urban planning.¹⁷ Whereas in other Hellenistic cities, the loss of the city-gate led to the rise of the city-square, or *agora*, as community centre. In Jerusalem, the Temple courts

effectively became the city-square for the international community of Jews. Just as pagan temples extended their sacrality through subsidiary shrines and altars, the Jerusalem Temple extended its sacrality through synagogues consciously modeled on the experience of the Jerusalem Temple precinct.¹⁸

Lee Levine's comprehensive text, *The Ancient Synagogue*, locates the fore-runner of the synagogue, especially as it existed in Palestine, in the institution of the city-gate. This has the advantage of describing the synagogue, or at least an institution with many synagogal functions, as it existed throughout Israelite history. His theory is firmly rooted in social-scientific analysis, examining carefully how Hellenism and events in Jewish and Near Eastern history contributed to the transition from city-gate to synagogue. Levine lists the functions of the synagogue as a courtroom, school, hostel, locus for political meetings and social gatherings, treasury, place of manumission, communal meals, and religious-liturgical functions, and argues that virtually all of these activities previously took place at the city gate.¹⁹ The city-gate served as a marketplace (II Kings 7:1), a place where rulers and prophets could speak to the community (I Kings 22:10; Jeremiah 38:7), and where official appointments were made (II Chronicles 32:6). In at least one instance, Torah reading rituals were performed there (Nehemiah 8), and, in pre-exilic times, cult rituals took place there (II Kings 23:8). However,

by the Hellenistic period, the functions previously associated with the city-gate and adjacent square were relocated to a building that came to be known as a synagogue, a change required when the biblical city-gate complex was transformed from a center of urban activity into a simple, functional gate for entrance and exit.²⁰

Thus, his understanding of the Palestinian synagogue does not include competition with the Jerusalem Temple prior to its destruction, but rather an institution which emerged parallel to the sacrificial cult and for wholly different purposes.

Anders Runesson bases his theory, proposed in his dissertation *The Origins of the Synagogue*, on a social-scientific examination of the emergence of what he considers the definitive synagogue activity: Torah reading and exposition. These activities essentialize the institution of the synagogue, allowing careful examination of the phenomena unique to the

synagogue, while putting aside those which are common to Gentile and Jewish institutions alike.²¹ This analysis leads to the proposition of an early Persian date for the Torah reading ritual; whereby Deuteronomy is conceived of as being composed in the early Persian period for the specific purpose of being read aloud.²² This is seen as a response to the imperial strategy of Darius, who commanded his vassals to codify and enforce their ancestral laws in an effort to stabilize his empire.²³ Thus, he states:

The re-building of the Temple, the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem, and the public reading and teaching of Torah are thus different parts of an overall strategy orchestrated by Persian appointed officials and the religious leadership in Jerusalem, initiated and supported by the Persian government.²⁴

Torah reading rituals developed further in the Maccabean period as a response to the demand for assimilation by Antiochus IV, until they finally emerged as the central feature of a new institution in the Hasmonean period.²⁵ This approach has the advantage of tracing the development of a key and uniquely Jewish phenomenon which came to be the central feature of the synagogue. However, while this feature is well explained, the non-liturgical aspects of the synagogue, that is, the ways in which it is similar to Gentile institutions, are barely addressed, and thus must be filled in with contributions from Levine, Binder, or both. Runesson also distinguishes between semi-public and public assemblies, arguing that both existed in first century Palestine.²⁶ The semi-public assemblies are more like the Diasporic *collegia* or the Rabbinic *batei midrash* than the town community centre. These two types of institutions developed separately, though they remained interconnected; the different functions of each will be explored in detail below. The following examination of synagogue architecture and functions may help to clarify the positions stated above, as well as raise some questions about future work in the field of synagogue studies.

Although only a handful of first century synagogue remains have been discovered in ancient Palestine, it is important for our examination to determine: 1) that these buildings are, in fact, synagogues; 2) that they display some sort of uniformity; and 3) that they demonstrate being purpose-built or renovated for the activities generally associated with the synagogue. With regards to the function of synagogues, James Strange

proposes a list of architectural guidelines for synagogue buildings. They must have mass seating, distinct space for a leader, something to house scrolls (this requirement can be fulfilled by furniture, and thus is not necessarily archeologically evident), and space for standing to pray.²⁷ I will be describing the three most likely candidates for synagogue structures in ancient Palestine, Gamla, Masada, and Herodium in some detail with these requirements in mind and summarizing the findings with the goal of describing the key features of a first century synagogue.

The synagogue at Gamla is the oldest synagogue structure in Palestine, dating from the late first century BCE to the early first century CE. It was in use until the destruction of the city in 67 CE. The synagogue is the only public building in Gamla, and is quite large, measuring 25.5m in length and 17m in width.²⁸ It is located adjacent to the eastern city-wall, a location which Levine suggests is consciously modeled on the city-gate.²⁹ A series of benches can be seen on all four sides, looking onto an unpaved central area, which is surrounded by sixteen columns. A small paved strip in the centre of this area may have functioned as a base for a stone table used for Torah reading.³⁰ There are three entrances into the Gamla synagogue: a main one on the southwest side leading directly into the central area; a secondary one on the southwest side leading to the upper level of benches; and a third one in the northeastern corner leading to the upper level of benches.³¹ Also in the northeastern corner is a small stone basin fed by an outside channel, which was likely used for hand-washing.³² The proximity of the basin and the entrance to a separate bench on the northeastern wall has led Binder to propose that separate seating existed for the leaders of the assembly.³³ A niche in the southwest corner may indicate a space for scroll storage, though no nails were discovered here to suggest the location of a separate Torah-ark.³⁴ A *mikveh* is located across the street from the main entrance, and would have been fed by rainwater from the roof of the synagogue to about 1.55m in depth.³⁵ The building appears to be a type of basilica, constructed with a clerestory for light that would have also served to highlight the central area and leave the seating areas in the shadows. This construction would also have a distinctive silhouette from the outside, with its central roof one story higher than the aisle roofs.³⁶ It should also be mentioned that the workmanship on this structure far exceeds that of any other building uncovered in Gamla, which is often a marker of a cultic installation.³⁷ Thus, it seems, if not certain, at least highly probable that the building at Gamla was used as a synagogue prior to the destruction of the city by the Romans.

The synagogue at Masada, measuring 15m by 12m, was converted from its original unknown function into an assembly hall by the occupying Sicarii between 66 and 74 CE.³⁸ The renovations undertaken by the Sicarii include the destruction of a partition wall, the construction of a small room in the northwest corner, the addition of two rows of columns (two on the north side and three on the south), and the construction of four tiers of benches on all four walls, with a single bench adjacent to the corner room.³⁹ Two pits dug in the corner room were found to contain fragments of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel, leading to the suggestion that the room was used as a *geniza*.⁴⁰ However, an oven was also found in the corner room, causing Yadin to suggest that it was used as a dwelling for a priest.⁴¹ A *mikveh* is located 15m north of the synagogue, which would have held water 2m deep fed by rainwater.⁴² The main room is large enough to accommodate roughly two hundred and fifty people,⁴³ which is slightly problematic given Josephus' assertion in *Jewish Wars* that nine hundred and sixty-seven people occupied the desert fortress during the First Revolt. Additional text fragments found at Masada (though not in the synagogue) include parts of Genesis, Leviticus, Psalms, Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (also found at Qumran), the Hebrew text of Ben Sirach, and Jubilees.⁴⁴ While the designation of Masada as a synagogue has been disputed,⁴⁵ the structure meets Strange's criteria, and, especially given the scriptural fragments found nearby, should be considered a synagogue for the purposes of architectural classification.

The synagogue at Herodium, much like the one at Masada, was renovated from an original Herodian triclinium by Sicarii during the First Revolt.⁴⁶ In fact, the strongest support for designating this structure as a synagogue is based on comparison with the Masada building. The synagogue measures 15.15m by 10.6m. It was supported by either four or six columns.⁴⁷ These columns, however, were erected hastily and poorly, indicating that it was necessary to have columns between the central space and the benches for some functional reason.⁴⁸ The rebels constructed several rows of benches on all four walls,⁴⁹ and filled in all the windows and doors, leaving the main entrance accessible, but considerably narrower than originally constructed.⁵⁰ While Kee (and others) dispute the designation of Herodium as a synagogue,⁵¹ the structure clearly meets Strange's criteria, and thus will be considered a synagogue in this analysis.

For the sake of brevity, only those structures most widely designated as synagogues were discussed in detail. Clearly, there is some

uniformity between these three structures, which has led James Strange to search for a model upon which the unique layout of the synagogue could have been based. All of the synagogues have tiered benches on three or four walls. The seating arrangement on all four sides indicates that debate was common, with all the members of the congregation looking at each other. The tiered nature of the seating, as well as the construction of a single bench at Masada, may indicate that there was a hierarchy in the synagogue reflected by the seating, as suggested by Matthew 23:6 “*τὰς πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς*.”⁵² All of our synagogues, as well as potential candidates at Jericho, Qiryat Sefer, Capernaum, and Modi’in, have internal colonnades, and thus can be described as types of basilica.⁵³ However, unique to the synagogue is a colonnade between the seating and central area. In fact, “nearly fifty percent of the space on the opposite side of the hall is obscured by the row of columns nearest the viewer.”⁵⁴ This configuration is far better suited to hearing than seeing, which corresponds to Runesson’s assertion that Torah reading was the central activity of the synagogue. Though the construction for hearing instead of seeing corresponds to what we know about the activities of the synagogue, its uniqueness throughout the Greco-Roman world led Strange to use this feature as the key in his search for a model. He discovered that the court of the women at the Jerusalem Temple, and likely all the open courtyards of the Temple, was surrounded by porticoes or porches, so that “those who stood in the cloisters had to look through a balustrade of columns to see activity in the central courtyard.”⁵⁵ It is this striking experience which was recreated through the architecture of the earliest synagogues. Runesson, on the other hand, uses archeological data to make a case for two distinct institutions which can be termed *συναγωγή* in our period. Based on the size and location of the building in relation to the town, or based on analysis of the community which used the structure, Runesson deems the synagogues at Gamla, Capernaum, Qiryat Sefer, and Nabratein as public assemblies, while the similar structures at Jericho, Qumran, Masada, and Herodium reflect the semi-public institution.⁵⁶ Now it remains to be seen exactly what activities took place in each of these institutions.

While Philo’s descriptions of Diasporic synagogue worship and Josephus’ preservation of imperial decrees help us to understand the functions of the Diasporic synaogogue (which has been most recently and quite convincingly compared to the *collegia* or voluntary association⁵⁷) the Palestinian synagogue’s role in the daily life of villages and towns is more difficult to discern. Our sources are limited to Josephus and critical

readings of the New Testament, as well as architecture and inscriptional evidence. As a result, some of our descriptions will necessarily be based on analogy between the Diasporic and the Palestinian institution, but it will be made clear when this is the case. In spite of these limitations, recent scholarship has done much to illuminate the functions of the first century synagogue, and some definitive statements can be made. The synagogue was the central institution of a Palestinian town. It was the place where judicial proceedings took place and where administrative, political, and social meetings were located. It was used in times of crisis as an assembly hall. Perhaps most importantly, Sabbath observance centered around the local synagogue, with Torah readings, expositions, and, possibly other liturgical activities taking place. In Jerusalem, synagogues also played an important role in the thrice annual pilgrimage, and thus likely maintained close ties with Diasporic synagogues and communities.

One of the major roles of the synagogue in the first century was to act as the local judicial system. A common term associated with the synagogue, found on sixteen inscriptions, is ἀρχων, a term which appears frequently in the LXX to translate *nasi* or *sar*, meaning “ruler,” “official,” or “prince.” Ἀρχων is also a technical term in Greco-Roman politics, referring to a magistrate of a city or region, who “tended to the legislative and judicial affairs of the community.”⁵⁸ In Alexandria and Anitoch, Jewish ἀρχων conducted their official business as community magistrate from the synagogue building or complex.⁵⁹ It seems probable that the same practice was followed in the towns and villages of Palestine. Although, in Palestine the town leader (as opposed to the community leader in a multi-cultural urban setting) need not be as wealthy or well-connected to the Imperial powers; though the position was nonetheless an influential one, as depicted by Matthew 9:18. As judicial settings, the synagogue congregation often found itself acting as an *ad hoc* jury in both formal and informal legal proceedings.⁶⁰ The synagogue was the location of judgment as well as punishment (Matthew 10:17, 23:24; Mark 13:9; Luke 4:29, 12:11, 21:12; Acts 18:17, 22:19). Alongside magisterial proceedings, synagogues housed legal documents and decrees. Most importantly, of course, was the Torah itself, but synagogues also possessed inscriptions and records of decrees relevant to their community, such as the ones listed by Josephus in *Antiquities* 14, and records of legal proceedings within the community, such as manumission and donation accounts.⁶¹ Thus synagogues functioned much like a modern courtroom, with an ἀρχων as judge, a congregation as jury, and the Torah as law.

Judicial and administrative functions were virtually always located in the same place in the Greco-Roman world, and the institution of the synagogue housed them both in the towns and villages of Palestine. As stated above, the function of an *αρχον* was both judicial and administrative. As shown in Book 16 of Josephus' *Antiquities*, the synagogue housed the community's funds, especially those intended for the Jerusalem Temple. The day-to-day running of the town was completely in the hands of the assembly and its elected leaders, possibly through twice weekly meetings on Mondays and Thursdays.⁶² Although these meetings could have taken place in a city-square, if the town possessed a synagogue building, it is highly probable that this was where they occurred. Overall, it is safe to say that the local government was synonymous with the synagogue leadership and completely disconnected from the national government, or *Sanhedrin*, in Jerusalem.

Aside from the political function of the synagogue as the seat of local government, "sectarian," or other specific political philosophies found their home in the synagogue as well; although here we are speaking about the semi-public association synagogue, and not the public assembly house. Members of the semi-public associations who had been trained in specific positions or philosophy could attempt to dominate the public synagogue, and "it is in this context that we are to understand the mission of Jesus and other groups such as Judas the Galilean and his followers, the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees."⁶³ This was also the way in which new members were recruited, as can be clearly seen from descriptions of Paul's mission in Acts (Acts 9:20, 13:5, 43, 14:1, 17:1, 10, 17, 18:4, 19, 26, 19:8). It is evident that in order to preach in public synagogues, one would have had to be trained in assemblies which reinforced certain interpretations and rejected others.⁶⁴ But it remains unclear whether the semi-public assembly would have had its own Sabbath service, or whether it was a sort of *beit ha'midrash* where Torah reading and teaching was done on other days of the week.⁶⁵ While many different views were welcome in the local synagogues, positions considered too radical or out of line with the views of the congregation could result in expulsion from the synagogue, a situation which is alluded to frequently in the Gospel of John (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2).

The synagogue in Palestine was not just the town hall of the village, it also housed social meetings, communal meals, and assemblies in times of crisis. The synagogue was, quite literally, a place of assembly, as indicated by its most common Hebrew name, *beit ha'knesset*. In fact,

the most common imperial decree preserved by Josephus is the right to assemble or have a place of assembly.⁶⁶ Some synagogues, such as the one at Jericho and the one designated by the Theodotos inscription, had adjoining *triclinium* or dining rooms.⁶⁷ The room most commonly designated as the Qumran synagogue, room seventy-seven, is alternatively called the main dining room or the main assembly room. It is not out of line to assume that one room could be used for all these purposes, especially given the religious importance placed on commensality in this particular community.⁶⁸ The use of the synagogue as an assembly hall in times of crisis is seen in Josephus' *The Life* in his description of a war meeting at the Tiberius synagogue. The construction of synagogues as rebel strongholds in Masada and Herodium also suggest the central role of the institution in times of crisis. It is extremely likely that these structures were used for assemblies of elders, as well as for assemblies of the community at large, in order to come to quick decisions about looming events.

So far we have discussed the non-liturgical functions of the synagogue. But, of course, the synagogue is primarily a religious institution, and as such, its most recognizable and unique functions are liturgical. The most widely attested and universal activity of the synagogue is the reading and exposition of Torah. Though Torah reading does not always have to be liturgical, the reading of the Torah on the Sabbath in the synagogue, followed by translation, exposition, and *haftarah* is most definitely a liturgical activity, and cannot be non-liturgical, as suggested by Heather McKay. Torah reading was ubiquitous by the first century, though its roots go back much further to the early Persian period.⁶⁹ The Torah scrolls themselves had the unique property of conferring holiness on the synagogue building.⁷⁰ This is further strengthened by the fact that if a synagogue was desecrated in some manner, the scrolls were immediately removed and taken elsewhere, as described in Book 2 of Josephus' work *Jewish Wars*. There is some evidence that ritual purity was required before an individual came into contact with the Torah scroll, both from textual sources (*Ep. Aris.* 305-306), and from archeological finds. This illustrates that virtually all ancient synagogues were nearby either a *mikveh*, which was deep enough to allow full immersion, or a natural body of water. The water basin near the conjectured "best seats" in the Gamla synagogue also suggests that leaders may have washed their hands in front of the congregation before taking their place in the central area to read. If this assumption is true, however, then purity is the only ritual associated with Torah reading prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Though

accused of being anachronistic, it seems likely that the Torah reading ritual described in Luke 4:16-30 is accurate, due to its correspondence with other sources and the presumed architectural layout of the Nazareth synagogue. In this passage, we learn that it was “κατὰ το εἶωθος” to visit the synagogue for Torah reading on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16), and that the ritual begins neither with blessings nor communal prayer, but with the scroll being handed to the reader. The only ritual actions associated with the reading are “ἀνέστη ἀναγνῶσαι”, or standing up to read (Luke 4:16). After the reading is over, Jesus “ἐκάθισεν,” he sits down to expound what he has read (Luke 4:20). The scroll Jesus reads is Isaiah, not Torah; nevertheless an analogy can be made to the regular practice of Torah reading on the Sabbath in the synagogue. The exposition given after the Torah reading need not be by the same individual, and likely employed various midrashic techniques and translations.⁷¹ It seems that, at least in Palestine, Torah scrolls were read and preserved in Hebrew, and only afterwards translated if necessary. The Torah reading ritual was the most prevalent aspect of Jewish worship performed outside Jerusalem, and is a key element in Sanders’ assertion of a “worldwide unity of Judaism.”⁷² It appears that “an accurate knowledge of the laws and traditions contained in these scriptures was essential for maintaining a right relationship with God,”⁷³ and thus it is no surprise that Torah reading and exposition was the central purpose and defining characteristic of the ancient synagogue.

A popular position in recent scholarship has been to deny that prayer was a feature of synagogue worship prior to the destruction of the Temple. While the briefest glance at the evidence for Diasporic synagogues, virtually always called προσηύχη or “place of prayer,” makes it extremely difficult to deny the central place of prayer in the Diaspora. Increasingly scholars are questioning whether prayer also took place in the Palestinian counterpart. For example, E.P. Sanders, after previously stating he assumes prayer in the προσηύχη,⁷⁴ later states, “Jews did pray, and Jews also attended synagogues, but there was no necessary connection between the two.”⁷⁵ This position is closely connected to the theories of McKay and Kee (who deny even the institution of the synagogue prior to 70 CE) in that it is hypercritical of sources as a reaction to earlier scholarship and its willingness to use Rabbinic sources to retroject communal prayer into the first century. While there is no evidence that the *Amidah* or even the *Shema* were recited liturgically in the early synagogue, to deny that prayer took place there is simply incorrect. Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*, which almost surely dates prior to 70 CE, states:

You shall not do any work on it [the Sabbath], you and all your servants, except to praise the Lord in the congregation of the elders and to glorify the Mighty One in the assembly of the aged.⁷⁶

Josephus, in his work, *The Life*, or *Vita*, refers to the synagogue at Tiberius as a “prayer house,”⁷⁷ and describes himself and his colleagues as “performing our lawful duties and directing ourselves to prayer.”⁷⁸ Though these activities are not taking place on the Sabbath, it would be very strange indeed if the proper action upon entering a synagogue during the week was to offer prayers, but on the Sabbath was to abstain from prayer. Though the textual evidence for prayer in the synagogue is scarce compared to that for Torah reading, it nevertheless exists and cannot be ignored; and what is not said can perhaps be explained by the fact “that a house of prayer, or an ancient sanctuary in general, as a place where people prayed is so obvious that there would be no point in mentioning it.”⁷⁹

The activities described above are all based on evidence from synagogues outside of Jerusalem. In fact, we have no architectural evidence for synagogues within the holy city, and instead must rely, unfortunately heavily, on the Theodotos inscription. This inscription, discovered at the bottom of a second or third century Roman bath complex, is generally dated before 70 CE in the first century of the Common Era. Though some scholars, such as Howard Kee, argue for a much later dating.⁸⁰ The full text of this inscription is worth writing here:

Theodotus, (son) of Vettenus, priest and archisynagogos, son of an archisynagogos, grandson of an archisynagogos, built the synagogue for the reading of the law and the teaching of the commandments, and the guest-chamber and the rooms and the water installations for lodging for those needing them from abroad, which his fathers, the elders and Simonides founded.⁸¹

The reading and teaching of law is common to all synagogues, but there are several synagogue functions listed here which we have not seen in any of our Palestinian synagogues. This is likely to do with the synagogues location in Jerusalem, where, as Donald Binder has so thoroughly

pointed out, virtually all of the functions of the synagogue took place in the Temple Courts.⁸² Therefore, in the city, the synagogue would need to develop new functions, ones which are designed to complement and facilitate the Temple cult, not distract from it. In Palestine, a majority of people seem to have left their towns and villages to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem at Yom Kippur/Sukkoth, Passover, and Pentecost.⁸³ In addition to that, the prohibition against eating the Paschal lamb outside of Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:6) meant that thousand of pilgrims from the Diaspora would travel to sacrifice at the Temple on the fourteenth of the month of *Nissan*.⁸⁴ Therefore, we can assume that catering to pilgrims was a central feature of the Jerusalem economy. Furthermore, we have evidence that Diasporic communities maintained synagogues within the city, most likely for the use of pilgrims (Acts 6:9). Based on this, and on the inscriptions' mention of lodging and water installations, it is safe to assume that at least several synagogues in the city of Jerusalem functioned as hostels. However, Theodotos' building still has as its main activity, the first one listed, the reading and teaching of the law. So we see that Kee's comment that the Theodotos synagogue's functions "are not in the remotest degree characteristic of the places of assembly in the pre-70 CE period that preceded the institutional development of the synagogue," is dead wrong.⁸⁵ The differences in function may cloud the issue, but the fact is that the building is designated as a συναγωγή, its leaders are self-designated as ἀρχισυναγωγος, and its main activity is the reading and exposition of Torah.

Tracing the origins and development of the synagogue to its place of precedence as the central institution in the villages and towns of Judea and Galilee is a difficult task. The scholar must be extremely careful to critically examine sources and must restrain from associating the relatively well-attested Diaspora phenomenon with its more elusive Palestinian counterpart. Nevertheless, there should be no doubt left that the synagogue both existed and was extremely influential in the daily lives of Palestinian Jews in the first century of the Common Era. It was the locus for prayer, instruction, government, and community. It housed documents and assemblies upon which the proper functioning of the community relied. By the first century, the Palestinian synagogue was a well-established, central institution, which provided the setting and context for some of the most important and influential events in that tumultuous time.

End Notes

- 1 Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001), p. 34.
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Early Jewish Reform in Poland: Case Studies from Warsaw, Cracow, and Lemberg

Jeremy Moses

The Jewish Reform movement originated in Germany and spread to Western Europe and North America. While the movement's greatest success can be seen today in the United States, there was a small attempt at bringing Reform Judaism eastwards, to Poland. As historian Michael A. Meyer describes, "historians of the religious reform movement in modern Jewry have been notably neglectful of Eastern Europe."¹ Although Jewish reformation in Poland was certainly not as strong as in Germany or Western Europe, it had varying degrees of success. Reform Judaism - a Jewish religious response to the secular modern world, had varying amounts of success, dependent on the Polish city or area. This essay will explore the different responses to Reform Judaism throughout Poland by looking at the reactions of three different cities: Warsaw, Cracow, and Lemberg.

As Samuel S. Cohon describes, Judaism in the Middle Ages was defined by the ghetto, where all aspects of Jewish life were imposed on the Jewish community, effecting their daily routine.² There existed no concept of a "Jewish life" as opposed to a "secular life," for they were one and the same. However, in the eighteenth century, sparked by enlightened thought in Western Europe, which brought ideas of equality for all citizens, Jews in Germany started to feel a need to be more integrated into society. Moses Mendelssohn, widely considered the founder of the *Haskalah* movement, was one of the first who felt a need to integrate Judaism into German culture by translating the Pentateuch, or the First Five Books of the Bible, into German, but in a non-Christian interpretation.³

Despite the fact that Reform Judaism never had a substantial influence on Poland and Eastern Europe (like it did in the United States) the general reforms of the German Jews remained influential and important within the movement. As Israel Bartal explains, many of the reforms

of the nineteenth century that took place in Polish Jewish communities, such as the clothing reforms, mirrored the German changes.⁴ Signs of German *Haskalah* ideologies were seen all over Poland, especially in areas of “economic activity, social reforms and European ethics;” towards the end of the century, things such as “language, manners, attire, women’s status[...]” became more influenced by German *Haskalah* values.⁵ In short, Western European values were coming to the east and the members of the Jewish community were feeling the effects. What makes this phenomenon so remarkable is that the religious ideas of the modern day Reform movement did not have the same influence as more secular ideas.

Reform Judaism had its first service conducted by Israel Jacobson, in Germany.⁶ However, while classical Reform Judaism ideologies were constructed in Germany, the movement did not become developed until it reached the United States.⁷ The movement and its ideologies became prominent because of freer societies. In Societies such as Germany, the United States, and France Jews enjoyed greater freedoms and integrated fully into society. When and where, then, does Reform Judaism take hold in Poland? As Cohon explains, Poland and Russia did not experience a great amount of religious reform because of the stubbornness and power of the rabbis. Nevertheless, the *Haskalah* did have influence in Poland and Russia. However, in terms of religious change, the rabbis simply chose to ignore it, even though there were growing pressures to propose some religious changes.⁸ While this may be partially true, there were also some rabbis who advocated for change in their synagogues and communities.

One such community where the rabbis advocated for change was in the city of Warsaw. Since the late eighteenth century, there existed some movement in trying to integrate Jews into Polish society. For example, Mateusz Butrymowicz blamed what he considered to be Jewish laziness and superstition on the fact that Jews were separated from society. In fact, he believed that if Jews were more integrated, they would become less “evil.”⁹ Warsaw became a city that, by the second half of the nineteenth century, had an increasingly integrated and assimilated Jewish community. Opposed to Cohon’s argument, Alexander Guterman argues that the philosophies and ideologies of the Great Synagogue of Warsaw were actually shaped by the members, and not their leaders.¹⁰

The Great Synagogue of Warsaw was made up of intellectual, assimilated Jews. They were highly influenced by the *Haskalah* and tried to integrate into Polish culture. However, as Guterman points out, unlike in Germany, where Classical Reform was changing many old

Jewish traditions in order to make them more German, the members of the Great Synagogue were unwilling to depart from the traditional Jewish ceremonies, rituals, and services, which meant that none of the prayers were translated into Polish.¹¹ Therefore, the services of the Great Synagogue remained the same, but the congregants were mainly assimilated. This prompted the Orthodox Jews of Warsaw to refer to the Great Synagogue as *di daytshe shul* (the German synagogue), and to its members as “unbelievers.”¹² In fact, *Izraelita*, a Jewish press in Warsaw, made reference to “German” and “Polish” synagogues,¹³ signifying the divide of the Warsaw Jewish community in terms of synagogue affiliation and assimilation into Polish society.

The changes in the synagogue were significant, but not radical. The sermons delivered in the synagogue were aimed toward an intellectual, enlightened crowd, as opposed to a more traditional Orthodox congregation. They covered topics that concerned the Polish Jewish community, on both “religious and national matters.”¹⁴ Besides the sermons and the congregation, most of the service was the same. In fact, there was only a small group of synagogue members that broke off and started their own, more radical synagogue with mostly Polish prayer.¹⁵

One considerable concern for the functioning of the Great Synagogue involved member attendance, which was sparse. Most members only attended memorial services. It should be noted that, while the leading congregants were concerned with issues of change, most of the members were indifferent to synagogue affairs. Similar to the concerns of the Reform movement in Germany, the leaders of the Great Synagogue were worried that their members would find less and less connection to the synagogue and to Judaism. With their members only attending memorial services, the involved members and leaders of the synagogue started to express concern that the Great Synagogue would turn into “an institution for eulogizing and mourning, a place used primarily for memorial services.”¹⁶ Regular members of the synagogue were concerned that holding memorial services would create the idea that the deceased, who were prayed over, had a special contribution to make in the afterlife.¹⁷ With growing pressure from the congregation, the synagogue was forced to consult Dr. Adolf Jellinek and Dr. Goldschmidt, two leading reformers in Austria and Germany. Both concluded that holding memorial services was “contrary to the spirit of Judaism.”¹⁸

While Warsaw’s Great Synagogue would not directly fall into the category of Classical Reform, there are general connections that can

be seen between German Reform and Warsaw's changes. Although the changes were not as radical, the German synagogue leaders were also concerned with the indifference of their members because of assimilation. In addition, as illustrated by their concern with the memorial services, the Great Synagogue members felt more ideologically close to the Reform movement in Germany than their Orthodox counterparts in Poland.

A second response to Reform Judaism can be seen in the city of Cracow. What makes the situation in Cracow unique is the strong Polish nationalism that was found in the city during the mid-nineteenth century. As Sean Martin explains, like most other cities in Europe at the time, Cracow was very interested in becoming more integrated into the non-Jewish, Polish majority in the city.¹⁹ In 1844, a group of Cracow reformers, known as the Association of Progressive Israelites, created a Reform synagogue known as the "Tempel." The Tempel's services were originally conducted in German, because, as Martin explains, the synagogue members wanted to differentiate themselves from the established Orthodox synagogues of the city.²⁰

During and after the revolution in 1848, the Jewish community of Cracow became more and more active in Polish nationalist pursuit. There was even an instance when leaders of the Jewish community, including Rabbi Dov-Berish Meisels, went to Lemberg to encourage the Jewish community there to be more active in their political pressure.²¹ In fact, Meisels is famous for being a vocal supporter of the 1863 uprising against the Russians, and his efforts did not go unnoticed by his Polish counterparts, who saw him as the foundation for Polish-Jewish cooperation in the future.²²

The major issue surrounding the rising popularity of Reform and Progressivism in the Cracow Jewish community concerned the interaction between the Orthodox community and the Reform community, with the leaders of both sides taking authoritative roles in the *kehillah*. The main area of concern was in the realm of education for Jewish students. Since the Progressives were highly nationalist, they favoured changing the curriculum to be more reflective of Polish society. On the other hand, the Orthodox leaders, fearing change, fought to keep the established curriculum.²³ On other issues, however, the two groups had more cooperation, namely in the areas of the *mikveh* and ritual slaughter.²⁴

Also in Galicia, the city of Lemberg had a very different reaction to religious reform than Cracow. In 1939, at the onset of the Holocaust and World War Two, the population of Lemberg was approximately one

hundred ten thousand people, with approximately one third of them being Jews.²⁵ The city had a strong Orthodox community, with a minority Hasidic community.²⁶ The Orthodox community was worried about power sharing, in terms of relations, with the more secular sect of the Jewish community. In 1816, before the rise of the religious Reform movement in Germany, the Hasidic community announced a *herem* against Solomon Judah Rapoport, Benjamin Zevi Nutkis, and Judah Leib Pastor, the leading Jewish enlightenment thinkers, or *Maskilim*, of the city.²⁷ Then, in 1844, there was an Orthodox backlash against the appointment of a Progressive rabbi for the position of city rabbi. This appointment is important in light of the fact that the city rabbi runs the *kahal*, the institution that supervises all of the daily aspects of the Jewish community. One should also keep in mind that the Orthodox community probably saw the Progressive rabbi as illegitimate. The backlash resulted in the Orthodox community appointing their own rabbi to run the Orthodox community's daily affairs, parallel to the Progressive community.²⁸ In 1868, the secular Jews of Lemberg, feeling increasingly attached to German enlightened thought, created an organization known as Shomer Israel; this organization was opposed by later groups such as Doresh Shalom (1878) and Aggudat Ahim (1883), both of which called for more integration into Polish culture.²⁹

With the rising secular Jewish intelligencia in Lemberg, there was a growing need to create a more Progressive synagogue, to counter the solely Orthodox synagogues of the city. The intelligencia craved a more modern perspective of the world; and they wanted this perspective conveyed when they went to synagogue. Having trouble connecting to the old prayers, the modernized intelligencia held disdain for old practices; they wanted to go to synagogue to receive modern Jewish perspectives on social and moral issues through sermons, something that did not occur in Orthodox services.³⁰ The synagogue that the Progressives established was known as the *Synagoga Postepowa*, or Progressive synagogue. However, in later years, the synagogue was given different names, in different languages, such as German and Latin.³¹ One could assume the different names were given to show the intelligence level and interest of the synagogue's members. The synagogue also must have wanted to establish a clear distinction between themselves and the Orthodox community of the city. By having a synagogue with a German name, its members were aligning themselves with the Reform movements in Germany and distancing themselves from their Orthodox counterparts in Lemberg.

Tensions were high in Lemberg when the synagogue named its

first rabbi in 1844, Abraham Kohn. He gave his first sermon, in German, to a crowd at an Orthodox synagogue in Lemberg because the Progressive one was still being built.³² The crowd present at this sermon was not solely Progressive, since it was given during normal service hours at an Orthodox synagogue. Much of the crowd, who did not speak German, was bothered by the speech, most definitely not understanding the message Kohn gave of peace and unification within the entire Jewish community of Lemberg.³³

In retrospect, the reforms that Kohn imposed on the synagogue were not radical compared to some of the changes made in Germany and the United States. He kept all of the prayers of the service in Hebrew. However, this decision was no doubt highly influenced by the decision of the synagogue (before Kohn arrived) not to change the prayers. Originally, the intention of the synagogue was to only change the decorum, the music, and imposition of sermons;³⁴ in fact, most of the changes he made kept within the Jewish tradition, but made the service more modern. For example, Kohn had a cantor lead prayers, and he stopped the tradition of “selling the *aliyot* to the Torah.”³⁵ As Stanislawski points out, however, one radical change that Kohn did stand by was not making married women cover their heads during services.³⁶

While the changes Kohn made must have been seen by the Orthodox community as heretical, what truly bothered them was that he was a community leader. Kohn had a strong influence over the Jewish community in Lemberg. He tried to take away some of the oligarchic power of the Orthodox rabbis, and to modernize the way the Jewish community functioned. For one, he attempted (and failed) to modernize the tax collection system.³⁷ However, one old and out-dated law that the Orthodox community did heavily protest was the law imposed by Emperor Joseph II that barred Jews from wearing the traditional garb.³⁸ Hence, Kohn’s intentions were to integrate Jews into Polish society; this intention, however honourable, nonetheless caused a lot of opposition to his presence in the city, and in the Jewish community at large.

After the revolution of 1848, the Orthodox community began to fear that Kohn would support abolishing the entire tax system once again, leaving the Orthodox community without a substantial source of wealth.³⁹ During this time Kohn came under constant threat of the Orthodox community; he suffered such incidents as having windows broken in his house, and being physically thrown to the ground.⁴⁰ On September 6, 1848, a young Orthodox man named Abraham Ber Pilpel entered Kohn’s home

and secretly poured arsenic into the soup that the Kohn family would eat that night. As a result, later that evening the entire family became sick, and Rabbi Kohn and his infant daughter, Teresa, died.⁴¹

While Pilpel's motivations were never fully uncovered,⁴² the murder of Kohn certainly portrays the immense opposition the Orthodox community felt towards Progressives during the movements early establishment in Lemberg. The fact that Kohn was a politically motivated leader, and not just a philosophical ideologue, certainly did not help his cause. Unlike other areas in Galicia where there was a cold, but stable, relationship between the two camps in the Jewish community, Lemberg became the symbol for Orthodox backlash against changes occurring throughout Europe, especially in Poland. The Orthodox community still held enough power in Poland to feel, and in some cases demonstrate, that the Progressives were unfairly overrunning them.

Following Kohn's death there was a search for another prominent rabbi to take the pulpit in Lemberg. The congregation found Rabbi Bernard Loewenstein, whose father had been a rabbi in the Polish town of Lubartow.⁴³ Loewenstein, like Kohn, tried endlessly to modernize the Lemberg Jewish community. He believed that, with the assimilation of the Jewish community, he would have to find different venues, and ways, to get Jews into synagogue. As Bussgang puts it, "the synagogue was not just a place for festival and Sabbath prayers."⁴⁴ He began to conduct ceremonies honouring the prominent Jewish leaders of the city, as well as helping out Jewish causes, such as raising money for less fortunate synagogues in the area.⁴⁵ Loewenstein succeeded in following in the footsteps of Kohn, making the Progressive Synagogue in Lemberg a haven for the intelligencia of the city.

It is interesting to note the lack of evidence concerning the reaction of the Orthodox community towards Loewenstein's changes. Michael Meyer suggests that the reason Kohn was killed was not so much because of his Progressive views, but because he was the district rabbi; his Progressive views were being imposed on the Orthodox community. Meyer shows that Loewenstein, and Kohn's other successors, did not face as much animosity in the community because they did not hold the same important and meaningful title as Kohn. In fact, the community was split in terms of rabbinical authority, with the Orthodox community following their own rabbis, and the Progressives following theirs.⁴⁶ Since little is known regarding the specifics of why Pilpel killed Kohn, about whether he acted on his own volition, or was hired by the leaders of

the Orthodox community, it is difficult to discover how, and why, the Orthodox community became restrained when dealing with the successors of Kohn.

In conclusion, the cities of Warsaw, Cracow, and Lemberg all had different reactions to Progressive and Reform Judaism. While Eastern Europe was not known for its strong Reform presence, the movement was able to penetrate into these cities as a result of the *Haskalah* movement, resulting in strong secular Jewish communities. By the mid-nineteenth century many synagogue congregations felt that religious changes were needed in order to provoke interest in the Jewish intelligencia before they became fully assimilated into Polish society. Also important were the differences between Poland and Germany: firstly, that enlightenment thinking in general was not as strong in Eastern Europe as it was in Germany; and secondly, in Poland, and not as much in Germany, the Orthodox community, as illustrated by Lemberg, still had a strong leadership base that was able to deflect some of the push to reform. As Adam Ferziger explains, the Orthodox leaders of Eastern Europe thought that the Reform movement was just a phase; eventually Reform members would return back to Orthodoxy.⁴⁷ While there were other cities that did have Progressive synagogues, Warsaw, Cracow, and Lemberg illustrate the diverse reactions that Polish Jewry had towards the Reform movement in the nineteenth century.

End Notes

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- 35 Stanislawski, p. 61.
- 36 *Ibid.*
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The Tramp In *The Adventures of Mottel The Cantor's Son*: Jewish Life in the New World David Rafai Far

Shalom Aleichem's works frequently end on a similar note: the protagonist leaves the drudgery of the shtetl for the riches of America. His better known narratives, such as *Tevey The Dairyman* or *The Letters Of Menachem-Mendl* also conclude with such a departure. It is only in *The Adventures of Mottel The Cantor's Son*, however, that the reader finally gets a glimpse of Sholem Aleichem's vision of the United States. Having eventually immigrated to America himself, the author provides his firsthand impression on the country. Oddly, the portrait he paints of America resembles many of his descriptions of shtetl life. That is to say, the characters still maintain the folksy demeanor traditionally found in a village like Kasrilevke. This perhaps relates to the author's reception in the United States – he was largely dismissed as an unsophisticated relic of bygone times by increasingly Americanized Jews.¹ This sentiment of reproach was shared by Sholem Aleichem, who never quite adapted to American society.² As such, *The Adventures of Mottel The Cantor's Son* features a thinly veiled critique on American life. The events recounted in the work are expressions of Sholem Aleichem's view of the United States and its Jewish inhabitants. This is particularly clear when he describes celebrity culture and, in particular, the reaction of his characters to Charles Chaplin's famous Tramp. The Tramp was Chaplin's most recognized on-screen character and remained an integral part of the film industry and its early works. Towards the end of Sholem Aleichem's story, Mottel and his friends go and see some of Chaplin's early films at the movie theatre. This sequence of events presents a means for the author to both assert his familiarity with American society, and to provide a critique of the social norms which had become standard in the new world. The following essay will seek to demonstrate Sholem Aleichem's use of this scene and of Charlie Chaplin's phenomenal popularity to convey his thoughts about America.

Before proceeding with the analysis of *The Adventures of Mottel The Cantor's Son*, it is necessary to provide some insight as to the celebrity of Charles Chaplin. In the early parts of the twentieth century Chaplin rose to great fame while portraying the Tramp, his now world famous character. The Tramp's charm stemmed from his great cosmopolitan appeal.³ His derby hat, oversized coat, and baggy pants provided Chaplin with an appeal stretching across a variety of ethnicities and classes.⁴ To capitalize on this appeal, Keystone Studios – the production company responsible for Chaplin's first films – did not want him doing revelatory interviews.⁵ This caused the press to create a mystifying aura around Chaplin,⁶ which is likely the source of the countless rumours around the Jewishness of the actor. Indeed, much of the gossip surrounding Chaplin's ethnicity or faith can be attributed to the vague answers he gave to the more candid questions in interviews, as seen in a 1913 issue of the *San Francisco Examiner*:

Question: Are you Jewish? Answer: I am much more than Jewish. I'm a citizen of the world and I seek the happiness of everyone and anyone, religion irrelevant. It's why I'm in the pictures. I don't think what I am should simply be boiled down under Jewish or anything similar.⁷

This characteristic manner by which Chaplin provides non-answers to his interviewers only serves to magnify the fascination around his persona.⁸ Within Jewish communities, the actor became an enigmatic figure. At the release of his break-out hit *Mabel's Strange Predicament*, the review published in the *Yiddish Daily Forward* frequently referred to Chaplin as a Jew and even labeled him a *mensh*.⁹ Unaware of, or uninterested in, Chaplin's British origins, much of the Jewish American public believed him to have adapted the farcical forms of Yiddish Vaudeville to the big screen.¹⁰ As such, Chaplin was often idolized by a vast segment of the Jewish community in the United States.¹¹ There was a widespread perception that the actor was a standard Jew, finally living the American Dream.¹² Nonetheless, not all the views of Chaplin were so sympathetic. Certain newspapers accused him of taking Jewish stereotypes to an extreme and pandering to a gentile crowd.¹³ This evidently turned Chaplin into a polarizing figure in the Jewish-American world – with a segment of the population regarding the actor as an icon of modern day Jewry and others believing him to indulge the gentile world.¹⁴ This remained the case

until the onset of the First World War, when Chaplin openly admitted to his British roots in 1918 in an effort to galvanize United States military intervention.¹⁵

The thirty-seventh chapter in *The Adventures of Mottel The Cantor's Son* features a scene where Mottel and his friends all go to see a Charlie Chaplin movie. This portion of the novel is of particular interest. Indeed, this is a uniquely revealing instance in the text, where Sholem Aleichem provides insight into a typically American phenomenon that had deeply impacted life in the new world – the movies. Based on the time frame of the text, the characters are believed to be seeing the double-header of *Mabel's Strange Predicament* and *Kid Auto Races At Venice*. These were the first Chaplin films released by Keystone Studio and probably his most notable ones in these early years.¹⁶ Mottel makes reference to this event, stating he was going to see “the great movie star. Charlie Chaplin [...] What a great man he is [...]”.¹⁷ These comments provide the reader with a sentiment of what is to be expected in this section. By the early twentieth century, celebrity culture had already permeated American society and this aspect of life in the new world was abhorred by a portion of the newly arrived Jewish immigrants. Instead of focusing their attention on the worship of God, Jewish youth focused their admiration on celebrities.¹⁸ While Sholem Aleichem did not harbour such zealously religious sentiments, he had spoken out against this celebrity culture.¹⁹ Whereas his reasons for doing so are not common knowledge, he expressed his displeasure of the American obsession with the rich and famous.²⁰ As such, Mottel's appreciation of Charlie Chaplin already sets the tone for a critique of American Jewry.

On their way to the movie theatre, Mottel, Eli, and Pinney get into a discussion on the topic of Charlie Chaplin. This exchange parodies one of the major topics of discussion of their time – whether Chaplin was a Jew or not:

All the way to the picture house, we talk about Charlie Chaplin. What a great man he is, how much he must make, and the fact that he's a Jew. But as those who can never agree on anything – whatever one says, the other has got to contradict – my brother Eli says, “What makes you think he is so great?” our friend Pinney retorts that one doesn't pay a thousand a month to a mere nobody. Says Eli, “How do you know he gets that much? Did you count his money?” Says Pinney, that he read about

it in the papers. And how does he know that Charlie Chaplin is a Jew? Says Pinney, it says so in the papers. So Eli asks again, how do the papers know? Were they in they present at his circumcision? Says Pinney, the papers know everything.²¹

This discussion between Mottel and his friends on the topic of Chaplin's roots and wealth reflect the conversations held on these issues in the early part of the Twentieth Century. Sholem Aleichem, however, uses a markedly satiric tone in his depiction. Pinney's unwavering faith in the newspaper accounts, and the almost circular form of the argument, provide this section with a clearly humorous quality. The sense of exaggeration which permeates this depiction is evidently the author's way of ridiculing celebrity culture. Sholem Aleichem further stresses his view of the matter by taking the characters' discussion to an even more extreme level:

For instance, how do [the papers] know that Charlie Chaplin is deaf and dumb from birth? And that he doesn't know how to read and write? And that he used to be a circus clown? Eli listens to this, all in silence, and when Pinney is finished, he coolly asks, "Perhaps it's all a pack of lies?" Pinney flares up and says that Eli is nothing but a bore. I quite agree with Pinney. Even if Eli is my brother, by own flesh and blood, he *is* an awful bore. What's true is true.²²

As the discussion progresses and common sense is gradually replaced by more opinionated and less objective stances, the causticity of the tone and the absurdity of the contents increase. As this section of *The Adventures of Mottel The Cantor's Son* was being written around the late teens, Sholem Aleichem likely already knew that Charlie Chaplin was neither a Jew nor a cripple. Eventually, the various myths surrounding the actor were slowly dismissed and his readership became aware of the truth. This permits Sholem Aleichem to critique the American "obsession with celebrities." Indeed, Pinney's resolute belief in the veracity of everything he reads in newspapers, coupled with a certain gullibility, portray what the author perceives as a proneness, if not a desire, within the American, and certainly within the immigrant Jewish communities, to buy into gossip and hearsay.

This critique of American society appears to serve several purposes. Sholem Aleichem's works have frequently been branded as glorifying the mundane; and this was certainly true when he arrived in America. The teens saw a slow buildup towards the glitz and the glamour of the twenties. As such, the stories of Sholem Aleichem were generally cast aside by a public disinterested in both Jewry and the shtetl.²³ As a result of their adoptive environment, and the fact that they no longer suffered isolation in their places of origin, the Jews became increasingly Americanized and found themselves less interested in the old-world. Instead, they sought to embrace the glamorous nature of their new settings.²⁴ The satiric tone found in this novel may be perceived as a social caricature. The author depicts modern American Jewry as lacking the sophistication needed to step back from celebrity culture. Sholem Aleichem rebukes the notion that he is merely a folksy author associated with a bygone era; although, he was largely considered, within certain Americanized Jewish circles, to be unknowledgeable about American society and culture.²⁵ With the previous exchange, Sholem Aleichem conveys that he was well aware of his new surroundings in the new-world. Indeed, the mere fact that Sholem Aleichem displayed an ability to criticize American society at large evidently supports this notion. Lastly, the argument over Charlie Chaplin's personal life serves to convey one of the themes that Sholem Aleichem raises within the novel.

The Adventures of Mottel The Cantor's Son recurrently draws parallels between the shtetl and the Jewish neighbourhoods of New York City. In his previous writings, Sholem Aleichem depicted the shtetl world as relying heavily on gossip; much of the action in these communities was a result of hearsay or pure invention. This mindset is exemplified in the short story "On Account Of A Hat," where the events unravel as a result of gossip and simple events become magnified. This story recounts the humorous encounter between its main character and a soldier. The end of the story depicts the way rumors are created or spread as a result of gossip, and the deformation of reality which occurs in the process:

Even before he returned the whole town – you hear what I say? – knew all about Yeremei and the official and the red band and the visor and the conductor's Your Excellency – the whole show. He himself, Sholem Shachnah, that is, denied everything and swore up and down that the Kasrilevke smart-alecks had invented the whole story for lack of anything better to do.²⁶

The previous excerpt demonstrates the gossipy nature of the shtetl. The townsfolk appear to invent tell-tales purely for their own amusement. In *The Adventures of Mottel The Cantor's Son*, Sholem Aleichem merely adapts this trait to the Jews of New York City. This perhaps represents the apex of Sholem Aleichem's social critique. While the various Jewish characters encountered in this text are all striving to integrate into American society, whether by means of their work ethic or with the simple change of a name, they appear unable to shed the same behaviours and attitudes they had in the shtetl. This notion, which persists throughout the entirety of Sholem Aleichem's text, is markedly evident in the discussion of Charlie Chaplin. Mottel and his friends share a conversation that is patently reminiscent of life in the old-world, having simply replaced the local shtetl news with tabloid celebrity headlines. In this case, Sholem Aleichem unequivocally employs Charlie Chaplin as a device to emphasize that, beneath its more polished appearance, American Jewry has maintained its shtetl mindset. The introduction of Chaplin, sheathed in the narratives lighthearted and simple humour, ultimately allows the author to expose the true nature of a great segment of the Jewish American population.

As Mottel and his cohorts gradually make their way to the movie theater, Sholem Aleichem persists in his subtle exposure of Jewish American society. Big Mottel's purchase of movie tickets, for one, easily disregarded as another drole exchange in the text, represents a faint slight on the strong Jewish American tendency for showiness:

[...] I heard a familiar voice. [...] It is Big Mottel, who is no longer called Mottel, but Max. "Don't buy any tickets", he says. "Today is my treat". He takes half a dollar out of his pocket, throws it to the girl at the ticket office and orders her to give us three tickets upstairs – that is, in the gallery.²⁷

This episode obviously stresses Big Mottel's lack of refinement as he hurls money at the cashier. However, a sense of the price of movie tickets adds another layer to this action. During the teens, the price of balcony seating at a movie theater was five cents.²⁸ In fact, the predominant type of movie theaters in New York City – the nickelodeons (which were small storefront theaters) – charged no more than ten cents for gallery seating.²⁹ The fact that Big Mottel opts to spend half a dollar on three movie tickets once more reveals a dose of social criticism on the part of the author.

Sholem Aleichem was on record as declaring his disdain for the spend-thrift frivolities of the *nouveau riche* in the United States.³⁰ He deplored the materialistic mindset of the Jewish community once they were in contact with money and had forgotten the severe penury which plagued them in Europe.³¹ Movie tickets costing over ten cents in New York City was unheard of in the teens.³² The exchange between Big Mottel and the cashier reveals the strong association made within the Jewish community between personal success and financial prosperity, and the importance of displaying this wealth for social standing. It can therefore certainly be seen as a swipe on the values of American Jewry.

Once in the movie theatre, Big Mottel decides to do his own comedy instead of focusing on the film:

But next to the theatre door, we hear a high little voice squeaking. "Idiot!". We turn and stare at the door, but we don't see a soul. We gape at each other in astonishment. [...] Big Mottel who is now called Max, takes Mendel and me by our hands and we climb upstairs. Upstairs, he confides the secret to us: it was he who uttered that word, through his belly. He repeats the trick as we walk along, and we burst out laughing so hard that we find it difficult to sit down and watch Charlie Chaplin's tricks.³³

Big Mottel's laughable and inelegant attempt to be the center of attention, despite being in a movie theater, reflects American society's obsession with fame and celebrity. The fact that he pursues his comedic routine further stresses the ridicule of the situation further:

You probably think there is nobody greater than Charlie Chaplin at tricks. But Max can imitate him to the dot. When we left the picture house, he stuck a false mustache under his nose – just like Charlie Chaplin. He pushed his hat over his ears – just like Charlie Chaplin. He wriggled his behind – just like Charlie Chaplin – a spitting image! [...] Everybody outside the theatre began pointing: there goes Charlie Chaplin Number Two.³⁴

A sweeping number of Charlie Chaplin imitators had appeared throughout the United States and in particular amongst the Jewish communities of

Manhattan.³⁵ The desire to capitalize on the popularity of the actor by imitation was even seen as an easy road to fame. For example, Jewish actor Billy West eventually landed a film studio contract by imitating Charlie Chaplin's look and mannerisms.³⁶ Sholem Aleichem takes this phenomenon to obviously grotesque proportions to denigrate the widespread desire to mimic celebrity behaviour. The fact that someone as brutish and large as Big Mottel would feel compelled to imitate Charlie Chaplin without real awareness of the ridicule in his behaviour, is certainly comedic in nature. Yet the fact that his friends and the people outside the theater appreciated Big Mottel's imitation emphasizes the general acceptance of such conduct. Implicitly, Sholem Aleichem expresses his dismay at the Jewish community's tendency to overlook its own standards for the sake of integrating into the greater American society, even if it means adopting its less sophisticated or desirable attributes. As previously stated, Chaplin had become an icon for Jews across the new world. The popularity of his clownery at large represents a form of acceptance. Mimicry of his conduct is an expression of the desire to integrate socially in the American culture. Sholem Aleichem employs the actor as a tool to poke fun at American celebrity culture; it is also a means to decry the indiscriminate adoption within the Jewish community of any and all behaviour deemed American.

As the chapter comes to a close, Big Mottel's abilities are revealed to have been based on deception:

But my brother Eli's laughter didn't last long. Why? Because suddenly we heard that strange voice again, this time coming out of the ground. "I-di-ot!". From that day on, my brother Eli stopped going to the moving pictures and wouldn't even hear the name of Charlie Chaplin.³⁷

The deceitful extremity to which Big Mottel goes to impress his friends, in spite of his relative wealth, reveals the importance he attaches to attention. The combination of the ludicrousness and the inelegance of his behaviour clearly emphasizes Sholem Aleichem's critical opinion of the cultural leanings of his brethren. It showcases his distaste for the loss of more traditional values. The author had often decried the relentless pursuit of wealth and fame that plagued American society.³⁸ He was also extremely disappointed that such standards had so readily permeated Jewish American society.³⁹ Beyond Big Mottel's inanity, it is Eli's disappointment

which reveals Sholem Aleichem's mindset. His resentment and his disillusionment result from both his displeasure with his friend's behaviour and the realization that Charlie Chaplin is only doing the same on a larger scale. By extension, Eli's displeasure serves to decry the superficial nature of the values adopted by the Jewish community. The implicit criticism on the author's part stresses his disapproval of the unwavering acceptance of all values deemed American.

Charlie Chaplin was adopted by the Jewish world as one of their own. He was turned into an icon for Jewish Americans, who idolized him for his working class appeal and his apparent slapstick roots. The highly exaggerated manner in which Mottel and his friends discuss the rumours surrounding Charlie Chaplin serves as a caricature of the importance American – and by extension Jewish American – society imparted to tabloid news and celebrity gossip. Beyond this, and contrary to the belief commonly held, it demonstrates Sholem Aleichem's acute awareness of his adoptive surroundings. As the characters arrive at the movie theatre, Sholem Aleichem, in a characteristically humorous manner, displays the unsophisticated and boorish way his main character, Mottel, flaunts his wealth and seeks to draw the attention of his companions. The actions of this relatively well off individual and his inelegant behaviour represent an implicit criticism of the values of the American society and of the abandonment of deeper moral values for superficial self-satisfaction. Sholem Aleichem once more emphasizes his understanding of American society with his assessment of its customs. Indeed, the author denigrates the increasing importance of image and social acceptance to Jewish American society. Ultimately, Sholem Aleichem uses Charlie Chaplin as a mirror for the behaviour of his characters and by extension of the mores of his Jewish American brethren. Much like the famous actor, they choose to project what they believe will suit their public image. But like in the films, their performance is make-believe and only serves to debase them. It is remarkable that, as a recent immigrant to the United States, Sholem Aleichem was able to so readily pinpoint the increasing superficiality of Jewish Americans in contact with their adoptive culture.

End Notes

1 Khone Shmeruk, "Sholem Aleichem and America," *YIVO Annual* 20, trans. Beatrice Silverman Weinreich (1991): p. 212.

- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Harry A. Grace, "Charlie Chaplin's Films and American Culture Patterns," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 10.4 (1952): p. 355.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Robert Schickel, *The Essential Chaplin: Perspectives on the Life and Art of the Great Comedian* (New York: Irvin R. Dee Publishing, 2006), p. 73.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Charlie Chaplin and Kevin J. Hayes, *Charlie Chaplin: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 22.
- 8 Schickel, p. 73.
- 9 Chaplin, p. 112.
- 10 Schickel, p. 88.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 15 Chaplin, p. 153.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 17 Sholem Aleichem, *The Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), p. 216.
- 18 Nina Warnke, "Of Plays and Politics: Sholem Aleichem's First Visit to America," *YIVO Annual* 20 (1991): p. 251.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Sholem Aleichem, *The Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, p. 216.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Jeffrey Shandler, "Reading Sholem Aleichem from Left to Right," *YIVO Annual* 20 (1991): p. 309.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 310.
- 26 Sholem Aleichem, "On Account of a Hat" in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc, 1982), p. 118.
- 27 Sholem Aleichem, *The Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, p. 216.
- 28 Ross Melnick and Andrea Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look At Classic Movie Theaters* (New York: MBI Publishing, 2004), p. 104.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 30 Warnke, p. 253.
- 31 *Ibid.*

- 32 Melnick and Fuchs, p. 68.
- 33 Sholem Aleichem, *The Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, p. 217.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Chaplin, p. 136.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 37 Sholem Aleichem, *The Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, p. 217.
- 38 Warnke, p. 254.
- 39 *Ibid.*

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