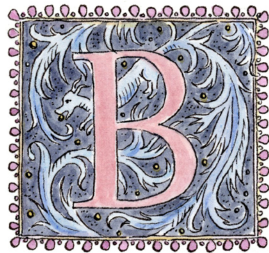
ALLEGRA GOODMAN

Judaism Without Borders, Diaspora Without Tears



ACK IN 2008, I heard the feminist critic Vivian Gornick speak at the Radcliffe Institute about Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. Gornick said that these novelists represented the full flowering of Jewish-American literature—and the end of the line. Post-immigrant, urban, misogynist, funny, angry, and famous in the broader literary world, Bellow and Roth bookended a particular cultural moment. Their work was inimitable, and their stature could not be replicated.

At the end of this talk, historian Steven Zipperstein stood to ask a long, erudite question. I don't remember exactly how he phrased it, but the gist was—don't you think Jewish-American writing continues? Isn't it possible that others are carrying the torch?

Gornick listened intently. Then, smiling, she answered, "No, sweetheart. You don't understand."

It's not wrong to look at Roth and Bellow and call their accomplishments unique. But art evolves even after great artists are gone. To name just a few, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nathan Englander, Nicole Krauss, Molly Antopol, Omer Friedlander, and I continue to contribute to Jewish-American literature. We differ in background, style, and interests, but we engage with Judaism and Israel and the aftermath of the Holocaust. I am sure that each of us would define Jewish-American writing differently—but this is how I would describe my work.

I was raised far from the large Jewish communities that Roth and Bellow knew. *The World of Our Fathers* was not the world of my father, who grew up in Los Angeles, where he attended Hebrew High School. I was born in Brooklyn, but when I was two, my parents moved to Honolulu to teach at the University of Hawaii.

I read about the Lower East Side in books such as *All-of-a-Kind Family*. In the summers, I flew with my family to New York to visit—but in my experience, the cultural neuroses Roth mocked and celebrated did not loom large, nor did Bellow's sense of overcoming and self-fashioning. At school, my classmates were Asian and Polynesian. The immigrant experience in Hawaii had nothing to do with Ellis Island.

Lacking numbers, Jews in Hawaii had little visibility in the 1970s and early 1980s. Our Israel Independence celebration, our tiny Hebrew school, the olive tree we planted at the zoo—all our activities were homemade. Really, we were just a few families. Parents trying to teach kids. I did not know what it was like to participate in a thriving youth group or attend day school. My biologist mother grew up in Brooklyn, and she was a graduate of Yeshivah Flatbush. She told me about the dual curriculum there, and when I was in elementary school, I remember her saying, "If we move back East now, you could catch up—but in a few years, it will be too late."

The academic job market did not permit a quick move, and

my parents could not provide a day school education on their own — but they did instill a strong Jewish identity. This came from attending services on Shabbat. My philosopher father led *shacharit*, a Yemenite man named Tuki Barzilai read Torah every week, and we all pieced it together in a minyan that met in a Quonset hut and then in a Unitarian church and finally at the Reform temple, which did not hold services on Saturdays.

Through repetition, I learned the parts of the service. Because of my parents' commitment, Shabbat became a habit. This childhood practice shaped life for my sister and me. It influenced my work as well. I grew up knowing little about institutional Judaism, but Jewish spiritual life fascinated me. At 17, I wrote my first story about a tragicomic Hawaiian Yom Kippur led by a pair of Hasidic "baby rabbis" sent from the Mainland. The story, published in my collection *Total Immersion*, is called "And Also Much Cattle" and juxtaposes the Yom Kippur liturgy with the squabbles of a chaotic minyan.

Funny, sad, and intertextual, "And Also Much Cattle" touches on questions I continue to explore. What does it mean to be a Jew? How do people practice Judaism? What is it about Jewish liturgy that moves us even now? In style, my early stories were satirical, their situations odd. "Diaspora without tears," my poet grandmother called my work.

Later, I adopted other voices, some serious and elegiac. "Where is the sparkling Allegra Goodman I used to know?" my editor Ted Solotaroff asked when he read an early draft of my novel *Kaaterskill Falls*. An old friend of Philip Roth's, he was a fan of my early stories. But I was interested in many moods and modes of Jewish life. Over time I've written about an Orthodox literary critic who does not believe in God ("Variant Text"), a seeker who travels to Jerusalem to learn (*Paradise Park*), a family sitting shiva for one day ("Apple Cake") — these are all my people. I write about observance and its lack.

When Jewish life is lacking in my fiction, readers sometimes wonder how I position myself as a Jewish writer. Sometimes cautious,

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sometimes curious, sometimes challenging — the tone varies — but the observation is that at the beginning of my career, my work was very Jewish, and now it's less so. Why the change?

It's a fair question. While *Kaaterskill Falls* was about a deeply observant Jewish community, I seem to stray in later books. I write about scientists in *Intuition*, tech entrepreneurs in *The Cookbook Collector*, and teachers and gamers in *The Chalk Artist*. These novels contain Jewish characters whose Judaism is incidental rather than essential. But I don't think of this as a departure. The reason is that I do not consider an observant Jew more Jewish than a secular one. And I don't think stories about observant Jews are more Jewish than those about assimilated Jews. As a writer interested in the full spectrum of Judaism in America, I take nonobservant Jews — even non-identifying Jews — as my subject, too.

Right now, I am writing a story cycle informed by specifically Jewish occasions. Like my book *The Family Markowitz*, this collection is a multigenerational portrait of a family coming together and coming apart, celebrating a bat mitzvah, fighting at a seder, praying on the High Holidays, naming a baby at a bris.

In contrast, my new novel *Sam* is a coming-of-age story without Jewish holidays or rites of passage. Sam is about a girl growing up on the North Shore of Massachusetts. Her father doesn't live with her, and when he and Sam see each other, she is surprised to hear that he is Jewish.

> On winter break, [Sam] . . . goes over to Halle's house and helps light candles for Hanukkah. Halle's mom and dad are Jewish, so they don't put up decorations. They don't even have a tree — but they do give one present per night for eight nights.
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> Sam tells her dad about this, and he says, "Oh yeah, I know. I'm Jewish too."
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> "What?" They are eating burgers on Rantoul Street, and he is stealing Sam's fries. "You never told me that. You never gave me eight presents."
>
> "I'm non-practicing."

It's a small moment, and by the standards of Jewish educators, a sad one, but this conversation is part of Sam's life, and it reflects what I see in the world. American Judaism is rich. It's also impoverished. It is flourishing, and it is also dying. I am no demographer. I'm not an anthropologist or sociologist. I write about individuals, not groups — but my subject is broad. As a novelist, I write about the varieties of Jewish experience. My work is about Judaism in its specificity and its lingering traces. In some of my books, Judaism is overt on the page. In others, it is barely visible, an impression underneath the words, like a watermark on paper.

It is tricky to write about Judaism as a culture, and I think it's problematic to argue for a Jewish voice or a particular Jewish sensibility, or a Jewish sense of humor. Today, the Jewish-American community is both diffuse and diverse, lacking a shared idiom and collective memory. Few of us speak Yiddish, although many Americans know a few Yiddish words. Even our greatest novelists have, as Vivian Gornick suggests, become victims of their own success, their work assimilated into the canon of American literature. What's left, then, for latter-day Jewish-American writers? I would argue that for all of us, the Jewish-American community remains a rich source of material.

Assimilation is a rich subject in itself. As the immigrant experience recedes, intermarriage is more than a personal heartbreak, as in Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye's Daughters*. It becomes a shared reality — and not always a tragic one. Conversion, adoption, heterogeneity enrich our community.

Many Jewish novelists touch upon the Holocaust, but few tackle the topic directly. We write at a moment when the last survivors are elderly, and the Holocaust is passing from living witnesses to historical record. The Holocaust has been a galvanizing force for many Jews — and Zionists. Will it remain that way? Will the Holocaust fade from Jewish consciousness? Or is the tragedy essential and indelible? I'm curious to see how Jewish-American writers engage with these questions. Nathan Englander does some of this work in his story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank" and his play by the same name.

I'm curious as well to watch the evolving role of Israel in Jewish-American writing. Instead of unifying our community, Israel has become a contentious subject. Certainly, Jewish-American writers take on the debate in editorials and essays. I wonder whether it is possible for us to reflect on Zionism not just politically but personally and aesthetically, as David Grossman and Etgar Keret do in Israel.

In America, our community is deeply divided and at the same time resurgent, with Jewish learning in day schools and adult education classes. This renaissance seems to me a vital subject. We live in an age of assimilation, but also the age of *Sefaria*. This is the nonethnic, post-deli Judaism that fascinates me. Jewish life beyond Roth, and Bellow, Woody Allen, and bagels and lox. I am interested in belief and skepticism, separatism and universalism, scripture, and tradition. And so, for me, there is no finer setting than a Reform synagogue, a fractious seder, or a traditional Yom Kippur service in Hawaii. Culture is in many ways ephemeral, but our religion endures. Judaism without borders, Diaspora without tears. ✳