Insider/Outsider:

American Jews and Multiculturalism

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and Susan Heschel

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Introduction

The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment

David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel

"It is necessary to refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and grant the Jews everything as individuals."[1] So declared Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre in 1789 during the debate in the National Assembly over the emancipation of the French Jews. To enter modern society the Jews were confronted with a demand to surrender their collective identity in exchange for full rights as individual citizens. Although they were not the only group whose emancipation was made dependent on dissolution of their medieval corporate status, it was the Jews who seemed to pose the most intractable problem for the European states.

Today's struggle, over two centuries later, to create a multicultural society in the contemporary nation-state has its historical origins in the very issue posed by Clermont-Tonnerre for the Jews. What can and should be the role of religious, ethnic, and cultural groups in a state whose theory of citizenship is based on individuals rather than collectivities? How are the identities of such groups to be defined and understood in a world that has undermined all traditional identities, in which terms like *religion, ethnicity,* and *culture* are constantly being torn apart and refashioned?

In Europe the Jews were one of the first of marginalized groups to confront these questions, and in the Holocaust they paid the highest of prices for the inability of the European states to give them satisfactory answers. If the European Enlightenment promised full equality to individuals, its own internal dialectic, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno showed half a century ago,[2] undermined the promise in a num-

CHAPTER 10

Language as Homeland in Jewish-American Literature

Hana Wirth-Nesher

The first official statement made by the president of the United States after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination ended with two words in Hebrew, "Shalom Haver," delivered with a southern drawl. At the state funeral several days later Bill Clinton repeated those words along with the last few lines of the Kaddish—"v'hoo ya'asah shalom aleinu v'al kol Yisrael v'imroo amen"—the foreign sounds produced with effort and in sharp contrast to the ease with which the emotions were expressed. As many journalists have noted, Bill Clinton is the first American president completely at ease among Jews, a man who studied among them at Yale and at Oxford, who relies on them as advisers and trusted friends. But more relevant for the topic of Jewish-American identity is the fact that vast numbers of liberal Jews, particularly in his generation and into the next, are comfortable with him. At the same time that the rainbow coalition and the multiculturalism that it expresses has posed problems for Jewish communal identity, Clinton has made significant numbers of Jews feel at home in America as never before. When he uttered those two familiar Hebrew words, he was addressing this Jewish-American community as much if not more than he was addressing Israelis. The WASP president from Arkansas was speaking *their* language. A Jewish speechwriter had undoubtedly transliterated those lines of the Kaddish into phonetic English so that the president could read them. Every Jew who had even minimal Hebrew school training or exposure to Jewish ritual would have understood them. In this respect, American Jews are part of a long tradition of bilingualism and even multilingualism.

Knowledge of languages other than the one in which the Jewish community lived has always characterized Jewish civilization, and the Hebrew alphabet has always been a central feature of Jewish life, as it forms the Hebrew language itself, Aramaic, Yiddish, and Ladino. In *Bilingualism in the History of Jewish Literature* published in America in 1941 (in Yiddish), Shmuel Niger made the case for bilingualism as a continuous feature of Jewish civilization from biblical times, "Take an old Jewish book—take the Bible, the most famous of all books—and you will see that one language has never been enough for the Jewish people."[1] Baal-Makhshoves had already made this argument in eastern Europe at the turn of the century.[2] But today this multilingual tradition has taken on new meaning, as American multiculturalists require recognizable signs of difference other than that of religion to qualify a group for membership. As neither race nor country of origin are viable options for American Jews, they have turned increasingly toward language, toward the foreignness of the Hebrew alphabet to underscore their difference. What part does language play in the self-definition of Jews in multicultural America? In a discussion of this subject, two factors play critical roles: the status of the author in terms of immigration and the date of the publication, more specifically whether a work was written before or after the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel and before or after the near annihilation of Yiddish and the revitalization of Hebrew.

English: The New Promised Land

From the turn of the twentieth century until the Second World War, the bulk of Jewish-American literature was written by immigrants or the children of immigrants for whom Yiddish was the mother tongue and English an acquired language as well as their passport to acculturation in America. In works by authors such as Abraham Cahan, Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth, the writer would often weave Yiddish or Hebrew words into the novel accompanied by a variety of strategies for translating the phrases into English for non-Jewish readers. As the drive to assimilate was paramount, writers withheld nothing from their American audiences, translating not only the words but also the rituals and customs into equivalences that their gentile readers could immediately grasp. Unlike the highlighting of foreignness and difference that characterizes some contemporary works, accessibility was crucial for immi-

grant writers, who sought poetic strategies to make the Old World accessible to the New. For this reason, it is startling to occasionally come across a reference where the author stubbornly refuses to translate in order not to jeopardize his or her full acceptance into American society. In Mary Antin's reminiscences about her various names and nicknames as a girl in the Pale, she wrote in *The Promised Land:* "A variety of nicknames, mostly suggested by my physical peculiarities, were bestowed on me from time to time by my fond or foolish relatives. My uncle Berl, for example, gave me the name of 'Zukrochene Flum,' which I am not going to translate because it is not complimentary." (The translation is "a slovenly prune," although "flum" could also refer to a "flame" and thus be a further embarrassment to the writer's modesty.)[3] Antin affectionately reconstructs the multilingual Old World, including her Hebrew lessons: "What I thought I do not remember; I only know that I loved the sound of the words, the full, dense, solid sound of them."[4] As for her other languages, she recalls, "I have no words to describe the pride with which my sister and I crossed the threshold of Isaiah the scribe . . . who could teach Yiddish and Russian and, some said, even German."[5] But her paean to English is most representative of assimilationist yearnings in 1912 when the melting pot still dominated American thought:

> I shall never have a better opportunity to make public declaration of my love for the English language. . . . It seems to me that in any other language happiness is not so sweet, logic is not so clear. I am not sure that I could believe in my neighbors as I do if I thought about them in un-English words. I could almost say that my conviction of immortality is bound up with the English of its promise.[6]

Not all immigrant writers were as ardent about the displacement of Yiddish by English, but for many there was almost an erotic attachment to the latter as it embodied their desires to be made over by their new country. In Cahan's novel *The Rise of David Levinsky,* published in 1917, Levinsky's affair with Dora is characterized by her passion for English refinement and their mutual striving for linguistic perfection. "Sometimes, when I mispronounced an English word with which she happened to be familiar, or uttered an English phrase in my Talmudic singsong, she would mock me gloatingly. On one such occasion I felt the sting of her triumph so keenly that I hastened to lower her crest by pointing out that she had said 'nice' where 'nicely' was in order."[7] Dora is the nurturing Jewish mother in every respect but one: her merciless exploitation of her daughter as English tutor for herself. When the child Lucy pleads to be relieved

of her reading lesson, her mother's obsession takes over. Dora commands "Read!" and then Dora "went on, with grim composure, hitting her on the shoulder. 'I don't want to! I want to go downstairs,' Lucy sobbed, defiantly. 'Read!' And once more she hit her."[8]

Even in a novel as conflicted about Americanization as Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers,* in which the college-educated heroine eventually marries the boy next door from the Old World and their home is overshadowed by her patriarchal father's chants in Hebrew, the courtship scene intertwines desire for English and sexual desire as the body is roused to produce consonants without debasing traces of other languages. At the very moment that the Yiddish-speaking immigrant girl-turned-English-teacher shamefully slips back into the vernacular in the classroom—"The birds sing-gg"—Prince Charming and future husband enters in the form of Hugo Seelig, principal and landsman, in time to rescue the damsel in distress. "The next moment he was close beside me, the tips of his cool fingers on my throat. 'Keep those muscles still until you have stopped. Now say it again,' he commanded, and I turned pupil myself and pronounced the word correctly."[9]

The passion for assimilation that characterized the literature of immigrants earlier in the century contrasts sharply with the recognition in later generations that translation entails loss. Compare Mary Antin's unequivocal embrace of English in 1912 with Cynthia Ozick's resigned embrace of 1976.

> They are English words. I have no other language. Since my slave-ancestors left off building the Pyramids to wander in the wilderness of Sinai, they have spoken a handful of generally obscure languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, twelfth-century French perhaps, Yiddish for a thousand years. Since the coming forth from Egypt five millennia ago, mine is the first generation to think and speak and write wholly in English. To say that I have been thoroughly assimilated into English would of course be the grossest understatement—what is the English language (and its poetry) if not my passion, my blood, my life? . . . Still, though English is my everything, now and then I feel cramped by it. I have come to it with notions it is too parochial to recognize. . . . English is a Christian language. When I write English, I live in Christendom.[10]

Henry Roth had already reached this conclusion in *Call It Sleep* in 1934 where his child protagonist David Shearl journeys from Yiddish to English and thus from Hebrew to Christian symbology and hermeneutics. Although David thinks of himself as the kid in the Passover liturgy and although he seeks the God of the book of Isaiah in Jewish scriptures, he is perceived by America's masses as a Christ figure. At the end of the

novel, in his semiconscious state, the English language speaks through him and it kills the kid who is reborn as Christ.[11] The Judaic liturgical references, when translated into their English equivalents, are infused with Christian theology. Ozick's Yiddish writer Edelstein makes this point forcefully in "Envy—or, Yiddish in America": "Please remember that when a goy from Columbus, Ohio, says 'Elijah the Prophet' he's not talking about *Eliohu hanovi*. Eliohu is one of us, a *folkmensch*, running around in secondhand clothes. Theirs is God knows what. The same biblical figure, with exactly the same history, once he puts on a name from King James, COMES OUT A DIFFERENT PERSON."[12]

Translating into America

As these writers have observed, translation has the effect of Christianizing both Yiddish and Hebrew or of transforming a *folkmensch*, a character rooted in a civilization that does not compartmentalize religion within the totality of its way of life, into only a religious persona. Whereas Jewish-American immigrant writers chronicled the shift from old language to new, the children of immigrants translated and reinvented Jewish literature to accommodate it to American culture. An extraordinary moment in this transition to American English occurs in Saul Bellow's translation in 1953 of Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "Gimpel Tam" into "Gimpel the Fool," a literary occasion involving the only two Jewish-American Nobel laureates. In the Yiddish story an outcast in his village is repeatedly tricked and ridiculed by his neighbors, a fate to which he is resigned. The rational, empirical world has no hold on Gimpel, whose gullibility makes him a saintly fool and whose love for his children overrides his pride at being the town's much taunted failure. Hence the aptness of the word *tam* which in Yiddish (and Hebrew) may mean "innocent" or "simpleton" as well as "fool." Finally, Gimpel's wife's deathbed confession that she has deceived him all along and that his children are not his drives him to the devil, who incites him to do evil. In a godless universe that is only a "thick mire," Satan urges him to take revenge on the town by defiling the loaves of bread in the bakery so that his deceivers eat filth. But Gimpel chooses to believe, nevertheless, for "the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies" and that what may appear to be outside of human possibility "before a year had elapsed I heard that it actually had come to pass somewhere."[13]

In translating this story originally written for an audience well versed in Jewish tradition but now aimed for a *Partisan Review* readership removed from Judaic texts and sources, Bellow retained only seven Yiddish words in his translation: *golem*, *mezzuzah*, *chalah*, *kreplach*, *schnorrer*, *dybbuk*, and *Tishe B'av*. With the exception of the last term, Tishe B'av, a fast day commemorating the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginning of a two-thousand-year exile, the other terms had already seeped into the American Jewish lexicon, in part through familiarity with literary works about dybbuks and golems and in part through popular culture, culinary and otherwise. Retaining words such as *chalah* underscored the quaint ethnic character of the story while also providing a few "authentic" markers of the lost culture. Actual liturgical references, however, no matter how common, were converted into American equivalents. And this is where the cross-cultural plot thickens. For in the English translation of "Gimpel" Bellow translated the well-known Hebrew prayer for the dead, "El molei rachamim," into the Christian "God 'a Mercy," a shift that transformed Gimpel's eastern European setting into Southern Baptist terrain.

In the case of Bellow's translation of "Gimpel," not only did he transform Hebrew liturgy into Christian parlance, he also omitted any phrase that either parodied the Jewish religion or, more to the point, ridiculed Christianity. In defense of Gimpel's gullibility in the face of persistent mockery from the townspeople, particularly when he refuses to doubt his paternity of the child born to Elka seventeen weeks after their as yet unconsummated marriage, Gimpel appeals to the *mass* gullibility of Christians: "ver veyst? ot zogt men dokh as s'yoyzl hot in gantsn keyn tatn nisht gehat" (Who knows? They say that Jesus'l didn't have any father at all). This somewhat coarse and demeaning reference to Jesus (the diminutive "yoysl") could be offensive to Christians, and although, according to Bellow, it was the volume's editor Eliezer Greenberg who deleted it when he read the story aloud to him, neither Singer nor Bellow had it reinstated in reprintings of the text.[14] Even in the decade of the timid emergence of Jewish-American literature in the shadow of the Holocaust, this was a risk that neither Singer, nor Greenberg, nor Bellow wanted to take.

In Bellow's novella *Seize the Day,* published only three years later (also in *Partisan Review)*, there is only one non-English rupture, and it is *precisely* that *same* prayer for the dead as recalled by Tommy Wilhelm in connection with his visit to his mother's gravesite. "At the cemetery Wilhelm had paid a man to say a prayer for her. He was among the tombs and he wanted to be tipped for the *El molei rachamin* [sp. *sic*]. 'Thou God of

Mercy,' Wilhelm thought that meant. *B'gan Aden*—in Paradise. Singing, they drew it out. *B'gan Ay-den*."[15] In other words, what was erased in the English translation of the Yiddish story reappears in Bellow's American story set in New York, the tale of another man who is a failure in his community, who is gullible, tricked, and repeatedly deceived. This is not simply a matter of influence, of Singer's story bearing down on Bellow's; it is an intertextual referent that places Bellow's work in relation to both Hebrew and Yiddish as purveyors of a lost civilization, the Jewish world annihilated in the Holocaust. It is apt that the only non-English in Bellow's text is a prayer for the dead.[16]

In the translation from "Gimpel" into *Seize the Day*, the Yiddish all but disappears and the religious phrase *El Molei Rachamim* is reinstated (with a more dignified translation—"Thou God of Mercy") as Jewish civilization loses its bilingual dimension and is transformed in America into Judaism. Bellow's text "remembers" the prayer but in an entirely different context. It remembers what it needs in order to exist in its new cultural landscape, an America dedicated to melting away ethnicity and retaining only religion.

Language as Difference

Bellow's literature of the 1950s both contributes to and critiques the metamorphosis of Jewish culture into Judaism, the third great religion in America. Transforming Jewishness into Judaism served both Jewish and Christian America. For Jews eager to assimilate and to "make it," the shift from urban immigrant neighborhoods where Yiddish coexisted along with English to suburbia and religious affiliation marked by liturgical Hebrew meant acceptance in American culture. As a religion, Judaism becomes a private matter, and the Enlightenment paradigm of the Jew at home and the citizen in the street finds its pristine expression in America just as these Enlightenment principles are bankrupted in Europe, after the genocide of the Jews on racial and not religious grounds. In America of the 1950s Jews could carve out a comfortable place for themselves in the American landscape as white European children of immigrants who practiced Judaism.

Simultaneous with the Jews settling in as mainstream Americans in the 1960s, the melting pot was superseded by the ethnicity movement that paved the way for contemporary multiculturalism. The anxiety and vulnerability

experienced by the American Jewish community just prior to the Six-Day War and the vicarious pride in Israel's victory brought about a renewed identification with a people, with a Jewish identity that religion alone could not satisfy. But ethnic identity for Jews in America has been fraught with complications and contradictions. The Old World was never simply one place—a Greek island, a village in Sicily, the shores of Galway. It was more than a score of host countries and as many mother tongues. In order to accommodate themselves to the ethnic revival, Jews needed more than ethnic foods and customs; they needed to create a homogeneous monolingual home, a mother tongue, and this was achieved in part by the reconstruction of a Yiddish shtetl past in cultural work such as Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog's *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (with an introduction by Margaret Mead), Singer's stories and books, and the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, to name only a few examples.[17] American Jewish ethnicity, however, deviated from the white ethnic "norm" in that there was no home country to which one could return, nor was there a living language that represented the language of one's grandparents. The eastern European world that had been annihilated in the Holocaust was replaced by another thriving Jewish civilization, Israel, a nation-state whose language was unknown to American Jews (except as liturgy). As a result, American Jewry has found itself in limbo between a homogenized mythical reconstruction of a Yiddish folkloristic world that has no manifestation in contemporary life and a Zionist socialist homeland that elicits allegiance at some level but also remains alien in language, terrain, climate, and to some extent ideology. No one has expressed this in literature more dramatically than Philip Roth whose doppelgänger plots have encompassed both the European Old and Middle Eastern Old/New Worlds. In "Eli, the Fanatic" Eli's secret sharer is a religious Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Holocaust survivor with whom he has no common language, only a common collective history. The legacy that Eli chooses to pass on to his son in the form of the black gaberdine, traditional garb of ultra-Orthodox Jewry, is one of mute darkness and suffering, not an alternative way of life that encompasses language. Years later Roth's Portnoy will find himself emasculated when he returns "home" to the alien beaches of Tel Aviv. In Roth's tour de force, *The Counterlife*, Nathan Zuckerman floats free between the extreme options of Zionist nationalist Hebraic culture and British Christian assimilation. He will choose to circumcise his son in an act that inscribes membership in a collective without any accompanying ritual, language, or collective memories that would give the act itself meaning beyond difference for its own sake.[18]

During the past few decades Hebrew and Yiddish in Jewish-American literature have both increasingly served as signifiers of difference in a cultural landscape that legitimizes and even requires difference. Two almost antithetical approaches can be found in the works of Cynthia Ozick and Grace Paley, who both aim at a split audience while representing "other" languages in radically different ways. Ozick's manifesto is particularism, the self-conscious invocation of motifs from Jewish language, liturgy, and intertextuality, at times expressed in a high modernist, even Jamesian style. She is an intellectual writer, attuned to the cultural significance of German, Greek, Latin, French, Polish, and other languages in the formation of Jewish collective memory and Jewish art as well as to the place of Hebrew incantation, Yiddish folk song, Holocaust memoir, and recurring motifs such as the golem or the tree of life.[19] In her Puttermesser stories she is almost alone among Jewish-American writers in clearing a space on the English printed page for the word *HaShem* (the Holy Name) printed in the Hebrew alphabet. Ozick aims for a reification of Hebrew within the English text which will transform the English into a language suitable for the expression of Jewish experience despite what she identifies as its inherent Christianity.

The very cadence and rhythms of Paley's writing, in contrast, betray the presence of Yiddish without reproducing the language itself on the printed page. Whereas Ozick insists on the bold presence of the other languages, Paley forges a new language, an English imbued with Jewish-American cadence and tone. When Shirley Abramowitz's mother in "The Loudest Voice" says "In the grave it will be quiet," the inverted syntax conveys the Yiddish source language. No translation follows as Paley's style and themes form a new ethnic voice that slips comfortably into pluralistic, multicultural America. When the child kneels at the side of her bed making "a little church of my hands" and reciting "Hear, O Israel . . . " it is not the Shema but the sound of a prayer already transformed into a staple of American Judaism.[20] Paley writes from a universalist concept of America that humorously ridicules Shirley for her naive yoking of Jewish and Christian religious practice but simultaneously applauds her spirit of accommodation.

For a younger generation of Jewish-American writers today, Yiddish is linked with memories of grandparents but has faded as a significant presence. An occasional *nuh* or *feh* peppers the speech of immigrant characters, and by now in many works these are markers of Holocaust survivor characters.[21] The few exceptions are either those whose grandparents played a major role in their upbringing, such as the case of Max Apple, a baby boomer fluent in Yiddish who chronicles his relationship with his grandfather in *Roommates*, or writers who are the product of an Orthodox religious upbringing, such as Rebecca Goldstein, whose *Mind-Body Problem* is sprinkled with Yiddishisms (mainly Hebrew words with Yiddish pronunciations): *yaytzah harah*, *neshuma*, *bris*, *chazzanes*, *shayva broches*, *averah*, *ayshes chayil*, and *shadchan*, to name only a few. Non-Hebraic Yiddish words are also associated with religious practice, as *flayshig and milchik*, *davening*, *sheitel*, or *gute voch*. Goldstein's protagonist searches for a universal language that will free her from her traditional Orthodox world, a search that leads her to Western philosophy and to mathematics. Small wonder that her husband Himmel's fame rests on his discovery of numbers termed "supernaturals." But neither of these two spheres frees her from either her Jewish past or her body's demands. Her book ends with a humanistic affirmation that combines Kant's ethical imperative and the memory of her father's chanting of the Kol Nidrei service: "On Rosh Hashanah their destiny is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many shall pass away and how many shall be brought into existence, who shall live and who shall die." Her character's response to this chant serves as the motto of many of the Jewish-American writers of her generation: "Long after I ceased believing in these words, the sound of them has caused my spine to tingle and my eyes to tear."[22]

For contemporary Jewish-American writers intent on preserving some linguistic sign of difference, it is the *sound* of either Hebrew or Yiddish and in some cases the sight of the Hebrew alphabet that infiltrates their English texts. Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons* is an interesting case in point, as her passion for French seems to be brought about by her family's rapid shift from Yiddish to impeccable English: "My family had made the transition from diaspora Yiddish to American English in a quick generation. You couldn't hear the shadow of an accent, unless my grandmother was around."[23] Since the languages from her grandmother's past—Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew—"came up like bile," the only strategy left to the granddaughter to perpetuate the tradition of bilingualism was to turn to another language. "Today I am a French teacher. I think about my Nanny, sliding from Hebrew to English to Yiddish. . . . 'Il n'y avais pas de suite dans ses idees': There was no connection between her ideas. Why does that sentence come to me in French, out of the blue? . . . It's not like my grandmother's switching, but it feels disturbed." After recounting her odyssey toward the French language and culture and her disturbing obsession with Céline, she recognizes that "I'm not writing only about French anymore. French is the mark of something that happened to me, that made me shift into another language."[24]

Unlike Hispanic Americans or Native Americans whose "other" language aspires to legitimacy, whose bilingualism is perceived by many as a threat to English monolingualism in the United States, American Jews for the most part are not actually bilingual with either Hebrew or Yiddish, and certainly they do not seek its legitimacy as an American language. Yet it would be inaccurate to relegate Hebrew to a liturgical language, such as Latin for Catholics, for two simple reasons: Hebrew has always infused diasporic Jewish existence far beyond the limited area of prayer, and since the establishment of the state of Israel Hebrew has become the living language of a Jewish nation, of a homeland. Most American Jews who choose to identify as such are in the paradoxical situation of acquiring two alphabets as children, English at school and Hebrew after school, and of acquiring some familiarity with the sight and sound of another language that connects them with a collective past beyond the bounds of the United States but that also remains alien. Perhaps where Hebrew is understood least it is reified the most, taking on some transcendence or authenticating aura. This strange phenomenon can be illustrated best by the example of the Kaddish with which I began and with which I would like to conclude.

Aleph, Bet, Kaddish

For most American Jews today ethnic difference surfaces at landmark occasions in their lives: at circumcision and naming ceremonies at which they take on a second, Hebrew name; at bar and bat mitzvah where they recite prayers and read from Hebrew scripture; at weddings where part of the rites may still be recited in Hebrew; and at funerals, where they hear the recitation of the Kaddish, a prayer largely in Aramaic characterized by an abundance of praise and glorification of God and an expression of hope for the establishment of peace. The practice of mourners reciting the Kaddish goes back to the thirteenth century, and it is this prayer that seems to have become inscribed into the collective identity of American Jews. It is ironic that the generation writing under the sign of cultural difference and aiming to renew its Jewish identity has focused so heavily on a prayer that marks death.

In 1960 Allen Ginsberg published his poem "Kaddish" dedicated to his mother, Naomi. More of the poem is given over to a Whitmanesque catalog of hers and society's ills and to raging indictments of capitalism as Moloch than to praise of God. Yet it adopts the meter and sound of the Kaddish long before the transliterated second line of the prayer appears on the page, in midchant, the first line taken for granted: "Magnificent, mourned no more, marred of heart, mind behind, married dreamed, mortal changed."[25] The Hebrew prayer blends in with the other sounds in Ginsberg's 1960s America, with the Buddhist Book of Answers and the evangelist's "God Is Love." "I've been up all night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind on the phonograph / the rhythm, the rhythm."[26]

Exactly one generation later, in 1980, Johanna Kaplan satirizes the displacement of the traditional Kaddish by the poetry of the Beats and the displacement of traditional Judaism by American culture. In the last chapter of her novel *O My America!* the narrator describes the memorial service of Ezra Slavin, son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, Leftist writer, and intellectual, which takes place in a library in midtown Manhattan. After the eulogies by family and friends, one of his former students reads Pablo Neruda's poem "For Everyone," followed by a song performed by the guitarist who introduced the deceased at an antiwar rally in 1965. Familiar to his audience and to Kaplan's readers as Pete Seeger's "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)," the words are taken from the book of Ecclesiastes. Just as he repeats the last line without guitar accompaniment, "And a time to every purpose under heaven," presumably the conclusion of the service, Slavin's estranged son Jonathan unexpectedly takes the microphone and "gulps out, 'I'm going to read the Kaddish.'" "Oh! Allen Ginsberg! What a wonderful *idea*!" whispers one of the assembled. "I saw him on the street the other day, and I really didn't think he looked at all well."[27] Jonathan's recitation appears in full in the text, a complete transliterated Kaddish in italics, and it stuns the listeners. "How could you and Dave possibly have allowed something so-so *barbaric!*" charges one of his friends. "It's a *prayer*, dear," assures another.

Recited in part, in full, with errors, or only alluded to, the Kaddish becomes a recurrent sign of collective memory and Jewish identity, a religious text turned marker of ethnic origin. In *Roommates* Max Apple whispers "Yisgadal, v'yisgadash [*sic*]," unable to go on until he hears his grandfather's Yiddish words. "'Shtark zich!' I told myself, and I did . . . my voice steadied, and I made no mistakes. By the last stanza everyone could hear."[28] Robin Hirsch's memoir *Last Dance at the Hotel Kempinski* ends at his father's gravesite, the new rabbi admitting, "Ladies and gentlemen, I didn't know Herbert Hirsch . . . " into which the son splices the words "Yiskadal [*sic*] v'yiskadash."[29] In the memoir *The Color of Water,* African

American writer James McBride's recent tribute to his white Jewish mother who converted to Christianity, he recalls the custom among pious Jews of reciting the Kaddish for a child who left the faith. "I realized then that whoever had said kaddish for Mommy—the Jewish prayer of mourning, the declaration of death, the ritual that absolves them of responsibility for the child's fate—had done the right thing, because Mommy was truly gone from their world."[30] This uncapitalized kaddish whose words are already forgotten along with its alphabet is a stark representation of assimilation into Christian America.

In almost all cases the Kaddish appears in transliteration, perhaps because publishers' policies and budgets don't allow for the printing of the Hebrew alphabet, perhaps because the mere introduction of a foreign language into a text already estranges the reader somewhat and authors fear alienating readers altogether with unfamiliar script, perhaps because the authors know that even Jewish readers may not be able to recognize the Hebrew whereas the sound of the transliterated prayer still has the power to remind and to stir. In light of the tendency to transliterate, when the Hebrew alphabet does appear on the page in an English text it is all the more dramatic, as is the case of Ozick's printing of *HaShem* mentioned earlier. I want to conclude with two powerful instances of such typographical ruptures of untranslated Hebrew, the first in Art Spiegelman's cartoon narrative *Maus* and the other in Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*.

The child of Holocaust survivors, Spiegelman is haunted by languages other than English, as the German *Maus* in the title testifies along with the heavily accented English of his father, Vladek, narrating his life story to his son. There are only two instances of Hebrew print in the book, neither one translated into English. The first takes place early in the war when Vladek is imprisoned and he recounts: "Every day we prayed. . . . I was very religious, and it wasn't *else* to do."[31] Right above the drawing of three mice in prayer shawls in a concentration camp are the Hebrew words from the daily prayer service: "Mah tovo O'holechah, Ya'akov, mishkenotecha Israel" (How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel). The painfully ironic juxtaposition of place and language in this frame is available only to the reader literate in Hebrew. In the second instance the actual words of the Kaddish are inserted into the text in what is itself an insert in *Maus*, the section entitled "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," originally published separately, which narrates Art's reaction to his mother's suicide when he was twenty. The words of the prayer are divided between two frames that show Art and his father in front of his mother's coffin,

but it is his father who recites the prayer, whereas Art recites from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Recalling that "I was pretty spaced out in those days," he chooses to document the Kaddish even though he is not the one speaking it.[32]

Throughout *Maus* the reported speech of the Jews during the war is rendered in normative English despite the fact that they were actually shifting between German, Polish, and Yiddish, whereas Art's father's English is heavily accented. This strategy emphasizes the perspective of young Art, American Jew and child of survivors, who feels the lingering effects of the Holocaust on his own life in his father's behavior toward him and his mother. The inadequacy of his father's English to articulate the horrors of his wartime experiences comes to signify the inadequacy of language altogether to convey suffering. In a work in which all of the nations speak a language rendered in the Latin alphabet (even the occasional word in German), it is all the more striking when an untranslated and illegible type surfaces on the page, as if to perversely validate the epigraph to *Maus*, a quotation from Hitler: "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human." What could be comforting because it is familiar to Jewish readers, the Hebrew print on the page, has often been perceived in Western culture as alien and menacing.[33]

Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, is a multicultural play par excellence. Not only does the play present characters who are WASP, Italian American, African American, Jewish American, Mormon, Eskimo, gay, and straight, but actors cross lines by playing more than one role; one actor plays both rabbi and Mormon, another both Eskimo and Mormon. Yet the work bears Kushner's Jewish-American identity primarily through uncanny eruptions of Yiddish and Hebrew. The play opens with a rabbi in prayer shawl at the funeral rites of the grandmother of Louis Ironson, Sarah Ironson, a Russian-Jewish immigrant whom the rabbi calls "the last of the Mohicans." Encompassing a dizzying array of America's problems, including the ozone layer as one of the last frontiers, religious fundamentalism, racism, and government corruption, the play focuses on the plight of a gay AIDS patient named Prior Walter, a descendant of Mayflower WASPs and Louis Ironson's lover. Louis's New York Jewish upbringing accounts for the few obligatory Yiddish phrases, among them a Yiddish translation from *King Lear* about the ingratitude of children and Louis's recalling that his grandmother once heard Emma Goldman give a speech in Yiddish. All of this lends weight to Yiddish as a defining feature of Louis's ethnicity, his claim to significant difference. But midway through the play Hebrew displaces Yiddish as

Prior's Italian American nurse involuntarily begins to chant excerpts from Hebrew prayers for the dead which have a kabbalistic resonance: "I think that shochen bamromim hamtzeh menucho nechono al kanfey haschino." "What?" asks Prior, and she continues with "Bemaalos k'doshim ut'horim kezohar harokeea mazhirim . . ."[34] Spoken in an automatic trance, unintelligible to both speaker and listener, and never translated for the audience, the lines describe Prior's soul departing the earth on the wings of the Shekhina (the Divine Presence, which in kabbalah is described as a feminine principle). When the nurse takes her leave of Prior, the stage directions magnify the transcendence of this moment by Hebrew erupting literally on the set. "Suddenly there is an astonishing blaze of light, a huge chord sounded by a gigantic choir, and a great book with steep pages mounted atop a molten-red pillar pops up from the stage floor. The book opens; there is a large Aleph inscribed on its pages, which bursts into flames."[35]

As the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the "aleph" holds a special place in Jewish tradition. According to one view of the revelation at Mount Sinai, all that the children of Israel heard of the divine voice was the letter aleph with which in the Hebrew text the First Commandment begins, "anokhi," "I." The kabbalists have always regarded the aleph as the spiritual root of all of the other letters, encompassing in its essence the whole alphabet.[36] Moreover, the monotheistic credo, the Shema, ends with the affirmation that "the Lord is One," thereby emphasizing the word *ekhod*, which begins with an aleph as well. It is the first letter of the first creature into whom God breathed life, Adam, and it is the letter whose erasure from the word *emet* saps the golem of life, renders him *met*, dead.

This mystical letter, prior to all others and source of all articulate sound, is revealed to the American Adam named Prior shortly before the ghosts of his ancestors Prior 1 and Prior 2 assemble at his bedside to await his departure from earth, to await what Prior 1 calls "Ha-adam, Ha-gadol," the redemption. At the play's end the Hebrew words uttered by his nurse are literalized on stage; after a blare of triumphant music and light turning several brilliant hues ("God Almighty . . . ," whispers Prior, "*very* Steven Spielberg"), a terrifying crash precedes an angel's descent into the room right above his bed as the book with its blazing aleph rises from the floor. What is this image doing in a play by a Jewish playwright in which a gay dying WASP is surrounded by a Jew, a Mormon, an African American, an Italian American as well as the ghosts of English ancestors? By signifying the anticipated redemption of AIDS victims in what is

depicted as a homophobic America, the aleph enlists Jewish sources on the side of transcendence. And by being prior to Prior, it relocates Judaism at the very center of Judeo-Christian America, as it was for the Puritans for whom Hebrew constituted their prior claim to Christianity against the Latin of Catholicism. Prior 1, his thirteenth-century ancestor, is heard chanting words from the kabbalah such as *Zefirot* and *Olam hayichud* in contrast with the contemporary Prior who sings lyrics from *My Fair Lady*, a Lerner and Lowe musical. Prior's observation that the arrival of the angel is very Steven Spielberg momentarily shifts the tone of the scene from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the content to the special effects. The inscribed aleph is indeed just that, a special effect, a foreign letter that gives the play a Jewish ethnic marker while simultaneously recognizing that marker as being at the very core of some fundamental American discourse that subsumes all ethnic difference. The aleph is a theatrical special effect that can be claimed by all.

In the sequel to *Millenium Approaches*, entitled *Perestroika*, Louis is asked to recite "the Jewish prayer for the dead" for Roy Cohn, lawyer and power broker who has just died of AIDS. "The Kaddish?" he asks the Gentile who made the request. "That's the one. Hit it." But Louis insists, "I probably know less of the Kaddish than you do," a point he proves by beginning the Kaddish and quickly swerving into the Kiddush and the Shema.[37] A ghost comes to his rescue, softly coaching him through the entire Kaddish—it is none other than the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, presumably also an Angel of America, another victim of prejudice in a premulticultural America. (In an earlier scene Ethel sings "Tumbalalaike" to Roy Cohn in Yiddish.) America's deepest problems and wounds are articulated in this play by means of kitsch and camp. Predictable American-Jewish ethnic markers such as the Kaddish and Hebrew letters such as aleph are paraded before the viewer in that spirit of self-conscious theatricality.

When Bill Clinton recited the last line of the Kaddish it was not only as a sign of respect for Israel's fallen leader and a reminder of his pursuit of peace (the last line is a prayer for peace), it was also for the benefit of American Jews, for in one gesture he recognized both the separateness of their language linked as it is to a spiritual homeland and America's own link to that prior civilization. Even a cursory glance at Jewish-American literature over the past century demonstrates that bilingualism, or at the very least diglossia, has always been one of its features, whether it was on a trajectory toward English mastery or on an opposite path toward recovery of ethnic difference and non-English customs, as is the

case today. Diverse strategies for representing the cultural space between languages have yielded diverse and rich works of literature by writers such as Henry Roth, Abraham Cahan, Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Rosenfeld, Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley, and Charles Reznikoff, to name only a few. These authors have drawn on both Yiddish and Hebrew as resonant signs of a Jewish textual and linguistic tradition of which they are a part. In recent years, as Jewish writers are further removed from both immigration and religious practice, their knowledge of these languages fades precisely at a time when multiculturalism requires clear markers of difference and language can provide those markers.[38] At its extreme, the Hebrew alphabet has been inscribed onto the body as tattoo, recently documented on the cover of the provocative San Francisco magazine *Davka*. The recurring motif of the Kaddish ritual in contemporary writing, an extraordinary act of artistic compression, affirms linguistic otherness as part of American Jewish identity. For those who can understand its words, its use as a sign of renewal is apt, for the Kaddish is itself an affirmation of God's glory, of hope for God's kingdom on earth. But for those who hear its sound alone, perhaps it remains a prayer for the dead. In either case, insofar as readers, in the solitary and quiet act of reading, whisper in their hearts the congregational response "brich hoo," it may also be a sign of community.

Notes

1. Shmuel Niger, *Bilingualism in the History of Jewish Literature*, translated from the Yiddish by Joshua Fogel (New York: University Press of America, 1990), 11.
2. Baal-Makhshoves [Israel Isidore Elyashev], "Tsvey shprakhen: Ein eyntsiker literatur," *Petrograder Tageblatt* (Petrograd, 1918). Translated by Hana Wirth-Nesher in *What Is Jewish Literature?* ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994).
3. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912; reprint, Salem: Ayer Company, 1987), 67.
4. Ibid., 113.
5. Ibid., 117.
6. Ibid., 208.
7. Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917; reprint, New York: Harper Books, 1960), 254.
8. Ibid., 253.
9. Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea, 1925), 272.
10. Cynthia Ozick, "Preface," *Bloodshed and Other Novellas* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 9.
11. Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991).
12. Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," in *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1976), 82.
13. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool," trans. Saul Bellow, in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), 413.
14. Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 22. Bellow did not translate the story from the printed text but rather from listening to Greenberg's reading it aloud to him; the translation was completed in one session. I am grateful to Ruth Wisse for drawing my attention to this fact and for sharing with me her unpublished essay "The Repression of Aggression: Translation of Yiddish into English."
15. Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (New York: Penguin, 1956), 86.
16. For an extensive analysis of the relationship between these two texts, see my essay "'Who's He When He's at Home?' Saul Bellow's Translations," in *New Essays on Seize the Day*, ed. Michael Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
17. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1952).
18. Philip Roth, "Eli the Fanatic," in *Goodbye, Columbus* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973); Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986); Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).
19. For a discussion of multilingualism in Ozick's novella *The Shawl*, see my essay "The Languages of Memory: Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*," in *Multilingual America*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
20. Grace Paley, "The Loudest Voice," in *The Little Disturbances of Man* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1959); reprinted in *Jewish-American Stories*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: New American Library, 1977), 470.
21. For a good example of the persistence of Yiddish see Leslea Newman, "A Letter to Harvey Milk," in *America and I*, ed. Joyce Antler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).
22. Rebecca Goldstein, *The Mind-Body Problem: A Novel* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 274.
23. Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 9.
24. Ibid., 201.
25. Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems: 1947–1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 212.
26. Ibid., 209.
27. Johanna Kaplan, *O My America!* (orig. ed., Harper and Row, 1980; Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 282.
28. Max Apple, *Roommates: My Grandfather's Story* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 210. There are many other examples of the Kaddish in Jewish-American literature which I do not have the time to discuss in this essay, among them Charles Reznikoff's poem by that name, Woody Allen's short story entitled "No Kaddish for Weinstein," and E.M. Broner, *Mornings and Mourning: A Kaddish Journal*.
29. Robin Hirsch, *Last Dance at the Hotel Kempinski: Creating a Life in the Shadow of History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 292.
30. James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 222.
31. Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon, 1973), 54.
32. Ibid., 102.
33. See Sander Gilman's extensive work on language and Jewish self-definition in both *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) and "The Jewish Voice," in *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
34. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Part 1: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), 98.

35. Ibid., 99.
36. Gershom Sholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 30.
37. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Part 2: Perestroika.* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), 125.
38. Uri Nir, "Avant Garde with Bagel" (in Hebrew), *Ha'aretz*, newspaper, August 30, 1996, pp. 42–44.

CHAPTER 11

Modernism and Exile

A View from the Margins

Michael Gluzman

The terms *exile* and *diaspora* have become fashionable tokens in much postmodern and multicultural theory. In his "Imperialism/Nationalism" Seamus Deane succinctly summarizes the postmodernist view of exile: "[Exile] can lead from belonging nowhere to becoming at home everywhere, a migrant condition that owes something to the old Enlightenment ideal of the Citizen of the World, but also owes much to the contemporary belief that there is an essential virtue and gain in escaping the singularity of one culture into the multiplicity of all, or of all that are available. In such a turn we witness a rejection of nationalism brought to an apparently liberating extreme."[1] This view of exile as privilege has its roots in modernist celebrations of exile. High modernists such as Joyce and Pound repeatedly emphasized the intellectual advantages of being away from home, presenting exile as a vehicle for individuality, freedom, and resistance. As Deane notes, modernist writers' "distance from and disaffection with their home territories has almost always been understood as a paradigmatic refusal of the writer to surrender his or her radical freedom to the demands of an oppressive state or system."[2]

In critical constructions of modernism and exile Jews often occupy a pivotal position. There are, of course, at least two reasons for the Jews' centrality in discussions of modernism and exile. First, Jews have historically been perceived as the paradigmatic diaspora people. Second, modernist Jewish thinkers and writers like Auerbach and Adorno, Celan and Kafka, played a key role in directing critical attention to the ways in which exile yields intellectual freedom and creative power. Given these facts, it