

## Resisting Allegory, or Reading “Eli, the Fanatic” in Tel Aviv

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IF READING A WORK OF FICTION is like waking up in a foreign universe whose rules have to be deduced, whose logic has to be decoded, then the challenge of this estrangement is compounded when that universe looks like home. It is one thing to inform students that Isabel Archer’s world collapses because James exposes her to a breach of etiquette that could only mean betrayal in a now defunct code of manners (her husband is seated while her best friend is standing); it is another to expose the unquestioned premises of the students’ own world. Reader identification with a character or a situation may often block critical reading more than facilitate it. If it is the teacher’s or the critic’s work to minimize the gap created by temporal and spatial distance, by history and geography, what happens when the teacher travels in time and in space? How does this affect the reading? My immigration to Israel in the mid-1980s had just this unsettling effect on my reading and teaching of works that had become all too familiar. Israeli students often had a refreshingly new approach to American literature. Whereas American students, for example, were incredulous that Jefferson or Emerson could have had doubts about the viability of a fledgling nation and culture only two or three generations removed from its founding, Israeli students found that anxiety to be comprehensible in light of their own place in history. Among the many examples of such cross-cultural interpretation that I have encountered in the classroom over the years, the one that has both intrigued and disturbed me the most is Philip Roth’s “Eli, the Fanatic.”

The story was first published in *Commentary* in the late 1950s and later appeared in Roth’s collection *Goodbye, Columbus*. Alarmed at the arrival of a group

of religious Holocaust survivors who have moved into the pastoral suburb of Woodenton, the resident Jewish community designates Eli Peck to be their representative in conveying their concerns to the refugees—namely, that zoning regulations do not permit a yeshiva on the premises. To be more specific, Peck has been asked to negotiate with Leo Tzuref, the ultra-orthodox head of what he terms an “orphanage”—eighteen war orphans and another adult refugee who calls attention to himself by walking through the modern American suburb in his black caftan, *shtrayml*, and sidelocks, mutely submitting shopping lists on his errands for the “home.” As Woodenton has only recently admitted Jews to its manicured lawns and split-level homes, the American-born Jews fear that the presence of caftaned refugees will jeopardize their hard-won affluence and grudging acceptance by their Protestant neighbors. As Artie Berg tells Eli, “If I want to live in Brownsville, Eli, I’ll live in Brownsville.” Others in the community are more graphic—they fear that the neighborhood will be overrun: “It’s going to be a hundred little kids with little *yarmulkahs* chanting their Hebrew lessons on Coach House Road, and then it’s not going to strike you as funny.” For them, the Orthodox Jews ironically pose a threat of intermarriage: “Next thing they’ll be after our daughters.” So intent on demonizing this threat to their assimilation into the American dream, they insinuate that the yeshiva may be indulging in more than merely “hocus-pocus abracadabra stuff”—“I’d really like to find out what is going on up there.”

In the wake of the Holocaust, this American Jewish community has no compunctions about putting the blame for antisemitism on the victims themselves: “There’s going to be no pogroms in Woodenton, ’cause there’s no fanatics, no crazy people.” This accusation makes its way into the formal letter of complaint that Eli delivers to Tzuref:

It is only since the war that Jews have been able to buy property here, and for Jews and Gentiles to live beside each other in amity. For this adjustment to be made, both Jews and Gentiles alike have had to give up some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend one another. . . . Perhaps if such conditions had existed in pre-war Europe, the persecution of the Jewish people, of which you and

those 18 children have been victims, could not have been carried out with such success—in fact, might not have been carried out at all.

In the course of Eli’s negotiations with Tzoref, he is convinced not only of the refugees’ right to remain in Woodenton, but also of his own moral obligation to empathize with the survivors’ sufferings and to perpetuate the civilization that has nearly been extinguished. This comes about mainly in his interactions with a third character, the mute “greenie,” as he is called by the suburbanites, whose obtrusive traditional garb has become the trigger of the community’s distress and insecurity, resulting in their demand that he adopt an “American” dress code. Only after Eli contributes his own impeccable designer clothing as a remedy does he realize that what the survivor had in mind was an *exchange*, not a gift that requires renunciation of a way of life. When Eli dons the black clothing of his double, including the hat, “for the first time in his life he *smelled* the color of blackness.” And when he decides to pass this blackness on to his newborn son, entering the maternity ward in his full religious garb, his community brands him a fanatic, and the medical staff treats him as insane. Although he asserts his right to greet his newborn as he sees fit—“*I’m the father!*”—the doctor administers a tranquilizer that “calmed his soul, but did not touch down where the blackness had reached.”

Any reading of this story will have to offer an interpretation of this “blackness” that is located so deeply within Eli that it is immune to the “treatment” that his American society administers. If we borrow from the discourse of identity politics, it appears to be an essential identity that he has recovered, one that has been there all along. It merely required a serious engagement with the greenie to reinstate it as a core identity for Eli. How is this achieved? And of what is this blackness constituted?

When I first taught this story more than twenty years ago in an American college, it seemed to me to be a fairly straightforward theme. Roth was satirizing post-World War II suburban Jewish America, with its reverence for mental health and therapy, upper-middle-class assimilation measured by designer labels and color-schemed landscaping, and well-heeled, well-bred Protestant America. Designated to represent his community in a legal struggle to remove Holocaust survivors

on the pretext of zoning laws, Eli undergoes a transformation, a conversion of sorts, when he is faced with the vapid and callous attitudes of his neighbors. His exchange of clothing with his double is the sign of this crossing over to the side of collective memory and responsibility, an act that is diagnosed as a nervous breakdown. Surely this was an allegory about the perils of assimilation, about the moral price paid for turning one's back on one's heritage.

The evidence for this was ample. Wasn't Harriet Knudsen giving the stones on her lawn another coat of pink paint? Wasn't Eli's pregnant wife, Miriam, leaving him notes about her oedipal experiences with the baby? Didn't Ted Heller reveal a moronic literalness of the imagination by feeling superior to the biblical Abraham because he used an X-ray machine to measure his customers' feet?

Look, I don't even know about this Sunday School business. Sundays I drive my oldest kid all the way to Scarsdale to learn Bible stories . . . and you know what she comes up with? This Abraham in the Bible was going to kill his own *kid* for a sacrifice. You call that religion? Today a guy like that, they'd lock him up.

Didn't Tzoref, the headmaster of the yeshiva with its eighteen orphans, represent morality over legality when he exposed the smokescreen of the zoning laws for further displacing his charges, this time by their fellow Jews? "What you call the law, I call shame. The heart, Mr. Peck, the heart is the law!" Roth had written a fable for his time, and it was my duty as a teacher in a suburban American college to explicate the parable, to turn Roth's searchlight on the communities that my students complacently called home.

Furthermore, the story lent itself to neat structural and thematic explications, particularly in its self-evident binaries. On one side, the Jews of Woodenton—American, English-speaking, rational, affluent, comfortable, and inclined to base their judgments on the law and psychology; on the other side, the Holocaust survivors and displaced persons—European, Yiddish-speaking, emotional, poor, suffering, and inclined to base their judgments on morality and mercy. What did each of these communities want? The former, to keep a low profile so as not to jeopardize their standing in the American professional and upper middle class; the

latter, to practice their religion and way of life in a safe haven after all their losses. For whom was Roth enlisting our sympathies? How could it be otherwise?

As long as I taught this story to readers who were the target of Roth's satire, it posed no particular difficulties for me. As the child of Holocaust survivors who never felt entirely at home on those manicured suburban lawns, I identified with Roth's exposé of postwar Jewish America, with his contempt for its smug materialism and its therapy-driven lifestyle. I could also identify with his character's need to be recognized by the mute Holocaust survivor, the man who moans and sheds tears but cannot speak to him. In a world that offered either pink rocks in the driveway or two tears on a silent face, the only humane option was to defer to the reality of the latter, to its call for moral action. In the ability to empathize with the victims of the Holocaust and to identify with the collective trauma of the Jewish people lay the only hope for a meaningful existence in 1950s America. The right kind of Jew, Roth's fable illustrated, turned his back on consumerism and donned the rags of a persecuted people in order to preserve its integrity. My students, fed on *Fiddler on the Roof* sentimentality for the lost world of the shtetl, were ripe for this reading.

But the plot thickened as I began to teach the same story at Tel Aviv University years later, after I had made Israel my home. As I was no longer teaching students who were familiar with Roth's milieu, what had previously seemed self-evident now seemed perplexing and even disturbing. It began with responses to Eli's double, the "Haredi" who refuses to speak, whose inarticulate groan, which Eli tries to simulate, signifies Jewish suffering through the ages, culminating in the Holocaust survivor as quintessential Jew. With regard to this character, "Eli, the Fanatic" is a story that invites allegorization. Nameless and speechless, the Haredi survivor has no personal features. He remains entirely a stick figure symbolizing loss: the sole survivor of a family that consisted of his parents, his wife, and his infant, poor and unprepared for life in America, and the subject of Nazi medical experiments that have left him incapable of fathering a family in the New World. A cipher for the unspeakable. American students did not hesitate to read him allegorically, to grant this mute dark figure surrounded by babbling social climbers the symbolic status of quintessential victim, so accustomed to violence that when Eli reaches out to button down the collar of his shirt, he flings his arms in front of his face expecting a blow. It is his

darkness, his blackness, that Eli takes upon himself as a mission, to perpetuate in every generation, to pass on to his son. Flailing his own arms about in a rehearsal of the greenie's movements, Eli vows to be loyal to his legacy: "He felt those black clothes as if they were the skin of his skin." And when the doctors, dressed in white, yank off the jacket and slip the needle under his skin, the drug cannot reach that "blackness" that has come to signify his authentic Jewish self.

And this blackness, this being true to himself, is the crux of the matter. Secular Israeli students have simply not been willing to concede what had seemed commonplace to Americans—namely, the conflation of the two identities: the representative Jew as Holocaust survivor and as Haredi. Even if the two metonyms had appeared separately, they would have troubled Israeli readers who resist allegorizing these two identities.

Roth's perceptive observation in the 1950s that American Jewish identity would be derived from identification with and empathy for Europe's exterminated Jewish community has been realized on a scale hardly imagined at the time of writing. The last two decades have seen a proliferation of Holocaust memorials and museums in the United States to the extent that Jewish identity in America has been largely constituted by collective memory of trauma. History has caught up with Eli's fierce commitment to pass on a legacy in which Jewishness is synonymous with victimization. But the attitude toward Holocaust survivors in Israel in the 1950s contrasted sharply with attitudes in America. During the first few decades of Statehood, the Holocaust survivor was perceived to be the very antithesis of the desirable new Jew returned to his ancient homeland, because he was associated with passivity, effeminacy, and victimization. This attitude has changed dramatically in Israel. Since the Six-Day War, and more intensely since the Yom Kippur War, Israeli culture has come to see continuities where it had previously seen only ruptures, and has come to understand where it formerly was quick to judge. The writings of Aharon Appelfeld, David Grossman, Joshua Sobol, among many other authors, have contributed to this shift in awareness, so that it has become easier for Israeli readers to identify with the survivor character, a change in communal memory that brings them closer to American Jewish culture. But conflating the Holocaust survivor with the Haredi invests the latter with an allegorical dimension that meets with resistance. For the change in attitude toward the Haredi has been in

the opposite direction. No longer a tiny minority perceived to be a saving remnant of a quaint way of life, a remnant for whom Ben-Gurion made special concessions during the early years of the State, the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel has become a significant and assertive presence, perceived to be a threat to Israel as a democratic modern state.

This resistance to allegory on the part of the Tel Aviv student results from his or her inability to identify with the Haredi character, given the tensions between these two communities in contemporary Israel. The question of who represents Jewishness in Israel today is ideological, political, and deeply emotional. The reader in Tel Aviv questions Roth's strategy of representing authentic Jewish identity as a convergence of ultra-Orthodox religious observance and a history of being persecuted. Whereas my American students, including those whom I continue to teach in the overseas program at Tel Aviv University, are not particularly troubled by Roth's metaphor of Jewishness and, in fact, continue to regard the Haredi nostalgically as an integral part of a folkloric Eastern European landscape populated by their recent ancestors, liberal Israeli students refuse to sign over their Jewishness to a sector of their society that they regard as a daily threat to their secular Jewish culture. From the Israeli perspective, there is an incongruity in the merging of the helpless Holocaust survivor with the politically powerful Haredi.

To read Roth in an American context is perhaps to recognize him as a Jewish writer who unhesitatingly uses the trope of the Haredi as a signifier of Jewishness. To read Roth in Israel is to recognize him as an American writer who locates Jewishness in Judaism. When viewed from Tel Aviv, Eli is less sympathetic, his born-again Judaism unsettling, even alarming. When viewed from Tel Aviv, Miriam Peck's desire for domestic fulfillment and psychological well-being seems almost attractive by comparison to her husband's, well, fanaticism: "Please, can't you learn to leave well enough alone? Can't we just have a family?" In Israel, where Jewish history is inescapable, where it permeates every aspect of life including the family, regulates the calendar, fuels political debate, and forges communal experience day in and day out, Miriam's desire to carve out a family space that eschews history and validates the inner life of the individual seems like a blessed interlude, too much to ask for. In America, on the other hand, where individual fulfillment and individual destiny are prized, Miriam's pleas must be measured against her

responsibility—or, in her case, irresponsibility—to community, in this case to the Jewish people. “*He’s* not your fault,” she assures Eli, referring to the Holocaust survivor. “Why do you feel guilty about everything?”

Reading “Eli, the Fanatic” now, in this time and in this place, compels me to take a more historical approach to Roth’s work than I had previously done, to see that it is of another time and another place. It is a tale of America in the 1950s, a brilliant satire about a community torn between the promise held out by America for individual self-fulfillment at the price of communal attenuation and its *own* pledge, in the shadow of the Holocaust, for collective responsibility and continuity. Roth presents the latter as an atavistic return to some primal darkness. Maybe reading Roth’s story in an American community haunted by the specter of assimilation grants Eli a certain integrity, even courage. Maybe reading the story in an Israeli community haunted by the specter of fundamentalism and theocracy limits the reader’s ability to empathize with the choice that he eventually makes.

And yet the Israeli reader is not immune to the story’s claim on his empathy and would like to comply. This can be accomplished by another sort of allegory altogether: by playing down the survivor’s historical and referential identity and transforming him, and the story, into a modernist, universalist, and existential text. Israeli students have pointed out that in the climactic scene between Eli and the greenie, white paint is splashed on them both, and that the latter conveys his message to Eli in pantomime. Moreover, “all [Eli] saw of the greenie’s face were two white droplets stuck to each cheek.” Pained by his double’s visage of pain, distraught and helpless, Eli cries out, “Tell me, what can I do for you, I’ll do it.” The mute responds with hand gestures and with the same “two white tears.” This moment triggers intertextual associations for Israeli students of literature who identify the mute as a Pierrot figure and the two mimes as Beckett’s clowns or tramps, gesturing in a world devoid of meaning. The mute figure, in short, has been to the “heart of darkness”; unable to articulate the horrors that he has seen, he communicates solely by sighs, moans, flailing of arms, and tears. It is the modernist failure of language, the dark vision of the twentieth century, cast in a Jewish American landscape. The Haredi survivor can be read allegorically only if he is universalized out of the sphere of Israeli politics, and out of Jewishness altogether.



The universalist reading is simply further evidence that in "Eli, the Fanatic," Roth exposes and then unleashes in his readers the forces of demonization within the Jewish community. The refugees in Woodenton have been victims of the European demonization of the Jew. The American Jewish community has internalized this perspective and, in a classic illustration of self-hatred, has projected its own low self-esteem onto that segment of their group that represents aspects of their own identity that they would prefer to hide. Tzuref and his crew are simply too Jewish when viewed through the eyes of the Gentiles whom they are fanatic about pleasing, and appeasing. For them, religiously observant Jews are the "other." At first, Eli identifies exclusively with his Woodenton peers, so that when Tzuref tries to get him to take a personal stand, "But you, Mr. Peck, how about you?" he replies, "I am them, they are me, Mr. Tzuref." But Tzuref will have none of this equivocation: "Aach! You are us, we are you!" From Tzuref's point of view, the boundary that divides Jews from the non-Jewish world supersedes the boundaries within the Jewish world, and he expects to be treated compassionately by those he defines as part of his own group. Although they regard him as "other," he acts on the premise that they are all part of the same remnant of the Jewish people. Whereas there is a seemingly unbridgeable gap between the greenie and Eli, best expressed in Eli's desperate plea to "just *look* at me . . . please, say something, speak *English*," Eli adopts Tzuref's view when he dons the greenie's clothes and vows to pass on some mysterious Jewish identity associated with the capacity to suffer. ("You have the word 'suffer' in English?" Tzuref once asked him.) Roth's literary strategy for representing an inclusive Jewishness that resists the demonizing practiced by Eli's assimilationist peers is through the allegory of the Haredi survivor. This is a literary strategy that makes a great deal of sense in suburban New York in the 1950s, but it is highly charged when it is read in Israel at the beginning of the millennium.

I came to Israel in the 1980s reading Roth's story with the empathy and maybe even sentimentality that the Jewish American experience had made possible. The Haredi figure could be allegorized as authentic Jew with no misgivings, particularly in relation to the radical assimilation and self-denigration of Woodenton's vapid Jews. During the past twenty years, the Haredi has become a menacing and powerful presence in my life and in the lives of my students. For many secular

Israelis, Tzuref and the greenie are as emphatically “other” as they are for Ted Heller in Woodenton. But times have changed in America as well, exemplified by the recent Beachwood, Ohio, zoning controversy that pitted Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews against each other over the construction of “religious buildings” by observant newcomers to the community. One of the greatest challenges for a Conservative or a Reform Jew like myself living in Israel is not to succumb to the demonizing of the Jewish “other,” despite the knowledge that I am the demon for ultra-Orthodox Jewry. I have come to revise my reading of Roth’s story in seemingly contradictory ways. On the one hand, it is necessary to historicize, to read it as a brilliant document of 1950s Jewish America. On the other hand, I have also come to appreciate its double-edged qualities, its insistence on exposing not only the shallowness of a society that would dub Eli a fanatic for choosing a visible Jewish identity and a commitment to collective memory, but also its exposure of Eli himself *as a fanatic*. Whereas the demonization of ultra-orthodox Jews by secular Israelis today has brought Roth’s Woodenton closer to Tel Aviv, the demonization of non-Orthodox Jews by the Orthodox religious establishment makes any allegory of the Haredi as generic Jew almost unimaginable and exerts extreme social pressure on the dynamic of entering Roth’s fictional world. Maybe “Eli, the Fanatic” is a far more wrenching story to teach in Tel Aviv today than in Pennsylvania twenty years ago because it forces Jewish Israeli students to regard *two* distant “others”: Jewish Americans and ultra-Orthodox Jews. Sadly, it becomes increasingly difficult to affirm Tzuref’s words to Eli: “Aach! You are us, we are you!”

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