© Copyright 2010 by Tova Mirvis. All rights reserved. Copyright belongs to the author. Paper may be downloaded for personal use only.

Writing between Worlds: On Being a Jewish Writer

Tova Mirvis

About fourteen years ago, I attended a panel at the New School in New York, titled "The Jewish Writer," which featured five or six Jewish writers, including Rebecca Goldstein, Dani Shapiro, and Steve Stern.

At the time, I was not really a writer of any kind, but I very much wanted to be. I had read all of the writers on the panel, and was in my first year at the Columbia School of the Arts, getting my MFA in fiction writing and beginning to think about what kind of novel I might one day write. In college a few years before, I'd taken one stab at a novel, a family story set in Memphis. Much of the novel was still unformed in my mind - really, what it would take to write a novel was largely unformed for me at the time - but even in this earliest draft, the family was Jewish, and observant. There wasn't yet a plot, not yet scenes or dialogue, but there were descriptions of Shul and Shabbat. By the time I started graduate school, I had put aside this novel and was trying out a few other ideas - at one point handing in for my fiction workshop the first ten pages of what I thought would be my novel. This was also a Memphis novel, also family novel, involving a story about my great Uncle Kieve, whose real name I used in this early draft. But this time, the imagined

novel that would spring forth from those pages was not going to be Jewish. I wish I could remember why I had made this decision -- was it self-consciousness about my own Orthodoxy, was it concern with whether such a setting would have larger appeal, was it a wish to disguise the family story I was going to tell? I don't really know, but at the time I was sure of it, until my teacher handed me her comments in which she made reference to the fact that my characters were Jewish. Annoyed by the presumption, feeling unmasked in some way, I asked her: "How do you know they're Jewish?" "Kieve?" she said. I hadn't known it was a Jewish name.

Somewhere in the midst of this attempt to find the subject matter for a novel and deciding in a larger sense what kind of story I wanted to tell, I attended this panel: Again and again, the question was asked, in different ways: Do you consider yourself a Jewish writer? Do you consider yourself a Jewish writer? To my surprise, the responses, which occupied the bulk of the evening, bore much in common with a magic show: it was an illusionist's delight, all these attempts to cut yourself in half, to both appear and disappear. At the time, I found the rampant denials frustrating - I didn't think the writers were wrong to protest so much, not necessarily or not all of them, and yet there was something annoying about the exchange. Was it a game of semantics we were witnessing? Was it a case of contrariness, to protest the premise of the panel on which you'd agreed to appear? Was it an attempt to be as little Jewish as possible - a possibility which was bolstered by a question tossed out to the audience at the end of evening as a semi-joke: which of these writers was the most likely to have appeared in a Christmas commercial as a kid? The answer was Dani Shapiro - whom many of the audience

members guessed correctly - but I had the sense that all of the writers might have been happy to be the one who had so successfully, publicly passed.

Later I understood the evening differently. Having been asked the question of whether you consider yourself a Jewish writer many times now, I look back at it anew, and think that the primary sentiment was not one of gamesmanship but one of resistance: a refusal to be trapped, to be pinned down, to be named, labeled, identified, circumscribed. Now it's easier for me to think less about what felt unsatisfying about the answers that were given, but what is unsatisfying about the question itself.

Certainly at that panel, and at many like it, the question sets up a roadblock along the way to more interesting answers. There was a stand-off, between the writers and the person asking the question, perhaps between the writers and the audience as well. "Are you a Jewish writer?" "Who wants to know?" the writer answers, through a door with the chain lock left on, through suspiciously squinted eyes.

Why does this question provoke this response?

There is, first of all, the problem of definitions: Before we can ask whether you consider yourself a Jewish writer, you have to ask what in fact is a Jewish writer, what makes a Jewish book. Must the writer's last name simply be Jewish in order to count? Does one become a Jewish writer by the presence of Jewish content, or decline to be a Jewish writer by the absence of Jewish content? What about the presence of one Jewish

character, one reference to celebrating Chanukah as a child? Do all or most of the characters need to be Jewish in order for the book to be considered a Jew? Can a book be half Jewish?

And then, even if you were to arrive at a workable definition, it is not always clear what is really being asked when we say do you consider yourself a Jewish writer: for what purpose is the question being asked. What is the question really trying to find out?

Sometimes the question is merely a way into a conversation, the “how are you?” of literary panels. In life when we ask this, sometimes we just want to hear “I’m fine” but sometimes we extend this question as an invitation to say more. I don’t know that to ask you but I want to really talk to you, so I will begin this way and see what I get.

Sometimes the question is asked as much of the reader as it is of the writer; certainly its many derivatives reveal something of the reader too. On many occasions I have been asked, with surprise, why would people want to read about the Orthodox Jews of my first two novels? This is always a question asked from within, almost never from without, and I hear in this a question of a reader’s worry about what of their world could possibly translate and be of interest in the so-called larger world.

Sometimes the questions stems from practical concerns as simple as “will your book work for my synagogue book group?” “Does it make sense to have you speak at my Jewish book fair?” In today’s publishing world, where marketing concerns are considered

as important, if not more important, than literary concerns, there is the bleak perception that no one buys books anymore, certainly not novels, certainly not literary novels. But of those no ones that are still buying books, there is the belief that Jews buy books. In this publishing climate, if there is the possibility that books might get purchased, ask if you are a Jewish writer, and more than anywhere else, you are most likely to get a 'yes'.

But beyond books sales and book fairs, there is inside the question as well, the wish to know how the writer fits into the Jewish world. What is the relationship between writer and community? Are your obligations and loyalties to the Jewish world or to the writing? It is a question of ownership, and inside it, is the fear of being corralled, of being asked to stand in for a set of communal values. In an essay in an anthology edited by Derek Rubin, titled Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer, Cynthia Ozick decries that possibility: "What could be more treacherous to the genuine nature of the literary impulse than to mistake the writer for a communal leader, or for the sober avatar of a glorious heritage? No writer is trustworthy or steady enough for that. The aims of imaginative writers are the aims of fiction. Not of community service or communal expectation .... If a novel's salient aim is virtue," she continues, "I want to throw it against the wall. To be a Jew is to be a good citizen, to be responsible, to be charitable, to respond to society's needs. To be a novelist is the opposite - to seize unrestraint and freedom, even demonic freedom, imagination with its reins cut loose."

In the same anthology, as well as in her response on the panel I attended, Rebecca Goldstein puzzles at the fact that much of her fiction has Jewish content, and the presence

or absence of that content becomes the criteria for determining whether she is a Jewish writer. She writes: “For the writer, the entire category of “one’s own kind” ought to have no relevance whatsoever. And so, unlike others with whom I sometimes find myself grouped, as representatives of the reawakening in Jewish American Letters, I don’t write exclusively in Jewish themes or about Jewish characters. My collection of short stories, Strange Attractors, contained nine pieces, five of which were to some degree Jewish, and this ration has provided me with a precise mathematical answer to the question of whether I am a Jewish writer. I am five ninths a Jewish writer,” Goldstein concludes.

But interestingly, one can also claim to not be a Jewish writer even when the subject matter is entirely, undeniably Jewish - in its characters, its reference points, even its literary style. Take for example, Nathan Englander’s first book For the Relief of Unbearable Urges: Stories. If we were to set up a sliding scale of Jewish content, a spectrum of Jewishness, surely his stories would be at the far end of the spectrum, as Jewish as they come - stories derived from the Talmud, stories about Israel about the Holocaust, about Reb Kringle, a chasid who plays the role of the department store Santa, all written in a style reminiscent of Jewish folk tales and rabbinic tales.

Yet Englander still does not consider himself a Jewish writer... "I write what I write," Englander said in an interview. "[Orthodoxy] just happens to be a world that I've spent a good part of my life in. This is what I was drawn to write about. And this is the world this book needed to be in. I don't even consider myself a Jewish writer. And if the next book needs to be in the world of formula stock car racing, then I'm writing about race cars."

Is he being cagey? Purposefully elusive? Is Goldstein being wholly facetious in her 5/9th equation? In both of these comments, I hear the reserving of the right to write about whatever the author wants, a refusal to be categorized, or prescribed. This, surely, lies at the heart of much of the protestation: To stake the claim to write about chasidim one day and race car drivers the next, to write too about Chasidic race care drivers if the writer so chooses.

But at the same time, in that articulation of artistic freedom, there is an underlying implication that to live fully in one world is to be less able to inhabit another; that to intimately know one world is to preclude the possibility of seeing others. In order to stake the claim at the universal, there becomes a need to diminish the importance of the Jewish material: "one's own kind ought to have no relevance" Goldstein says and "Orthodoxy *happens* to be the world I've spent a good part of my life in," Englander says. When Englander's book was first published, his editor was quoted as saying. "What makes [Englander] so remarkable is he's not writing about the condition of being Jewish. He's writing about the condition of being human." In order to make room for the rest of the world, the Jewish part must be kept in its place, something which one must supposedly navigate past in order for the larger, human truths to be unfurled.

But surely all writers live intimately in a particular world, even if those worlds don't carry such easily identifiable terms as Jewish. The notion that Jewish - or for that matter - the term woman writer or southern writer or any such descriptive term that can be

attached before writer - is a term of diminishment flies in the face of one of the central tenets of the fiction writer: the more particular you make something, the more universal it becomes. It is the fact that Englander's stories are so very Jewish, so steeped in a world, in its language and rituals that enables them to be human, not despite those features. *Because* he is writing deeply about what it means to be Jewish is what makes him write of what it means to be human. The Jewish lens through which the writer looks adds one more possible way of seeing. If a writer is one on whom nothing is lost, then why can't we greedily hoard these adjectives and see them not as a series of marginalizing limitations but as repositories of more and more particular knowledge?

In this comment from Englander's editor, it's also impossible not to hear the anxiety of marketing, the desire to position a book in such a way that it might have the best chance of scaling the ghetto walls. Beyond the need for free reign of the imagination, this, I think, is the central anxiety that lies behind the chafing at the term Jewish Writer. And yet, while the identifying term itself is cast aside, the use of the material that being a Jewish writer affords is widely embraced. To write today is to feel free to make use of the rich palette of Jewish history, culture, literary precedent and allusion without sacrificing a wider audience; it is the label "Jewish writer", not the material itself that brings with it the perception of a lessening of stature, of wide scale relevance.

There is, I think, something particularly Jewish in this the ability to do both itself and the opposite: to write of Jewish subjects, in a Jewish style, yet not be a Jewish writer. To protest the title of the panel and yet appear on it. The subtitle of Derek's Rubin's

anthology turns out to be surprisingly apt: it's not "On Being *OR* Not Being a Jewish American Writer" but it's "Being *AND* Not Being a Jewish American Writer." All at once, all at the same time.

It brings to mind the story of the four sons at the Passover table - though for my purposes here, would like to remove both the term sons and the terms wise and wicked. But if we were to imagine the writers on that long ago panel sitting around the seder table, staying up all night to debate the question of whether you consider yourself a Jewish writer. "What are these laws and customs to us," the first writer asks. "What are these laws and customs to you?" the second asks. According to traditional interpretations, the transgression of this child is that he separates himself from the community, from the relevance of the material at hand; he claims that he has no part in it. But according to a chasidic story, cited in a recent novel by Joshua Halberstam, <u>A Seat at the Table</u>, this child is not written out so easily from the story. He writes: "Well, says the Ropczycer [rebbe], we have something to say to this young man. Becoming an outsider isn't that easy. This isn't a unilateral decision, up to you alone. Our tradition includes you in our seder, like it or not. We make room on the inside even for the would-be outsider. You too have a seat at the table." Even the one whose defining feature is his statement of non-involvement is still at the table, still on the panel.

If for a moment, the protests were put aside, the freedom ensured, the marketing concerns magically allayed, then, we can begin to find ways around this question, to other more interesting ones, to find a back door into the question of what is it we talk about when we

talk about Jewish writers? Or what is it we say we are not when we say we are not Jewish writers?

In 1977, Irving Howe famously predicted the demise of the Jewish American novel: “American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources, a thinning-out of materials and memories." Did there remain, Howe wondered, "a thick enough sediment of felt life to enable a new outburst of writing about American Jews."

In reviewing recent Jewish American novels, many reviewers like to quote Howe and use the books under review, and the notion of a recent flowering of Jewish American literature, as proof of just how wrong he was. But perhaps Howe was not wholly wrong to name immigration as the central organizing, identifying feature of Jewish American literature. Perhaps he was just wrong in not anticipating how immigration could change shape, have its parameters expanded, and retain relevance and richness in unexpected ways.

In fact, immigration is still present as a theme. Among the most vibrant, unique entries into the recent Jewish American novels are the novels of Russian Jewish immigration - a continuation of the story of Jewish immigration to America, as told by Gary Shteyngart in The Russian Debutante’s Handbook, Lara Vapynyar in There are Jews in My House, and The Memoirs of A Muse, David Bezmosgis in Natasha and Sana Krusikov’s One

More Year. But there is a reversal of the classic story of immigration as well, a question which these and other recent novels have addressed with great thickness and energy: What has been left behind in the old world? In becoming so comfortably settled into the new world what have we intentionally or unintentionally cast off, and what can we still return in search of? In Shteyngart's Russian Debutante's Handbook, Vladimir Grushkin returns to the Eastern European "Prava" in search of a fortune, but also an identity that has eluded him in the new world. And in Nicole Kraus's History of Love, it is not a child or identity but a novel that has been lost, left behind, making use of a recurrent theme in recent Jewish American novels, the book within a book, which is usually a lost book to be tracked down and reclaimed by a later generation.

The theme of immigration can be stretched and understood in another way as well: if immigration is transportation from one world to another, and the subsequent experience of living with dislocation and in translation, then this can happen too in spheres where no one moves countries at all.

In her essay in the *AJS Review*, "Mediating Judaism, Mind, Body, Spirit and Contemporary North American Jewish Fiction," Sara Horowitz writes: "the depiction of religiously observant characters -- when they appeared at all in North American Jewish fiction - was often safely set in the past, in stories of origins and departures. Sometimes set in the present, Orthodox Jewish characters represented markers of the past, bearing the weight of the Jewish experience in the double sense of gravitas and burden. However since the mid 1990s there has been a virtual explosion of Jewish fiction in north America

that places Judaism, ritually observant Jewish characters, and traditional religious communities at the center...”

Or as Philip Roth wrote in his short story, “Eli The Fanatic”, in which a small Orthodox yeshiva, made up of young survivors, opens in a small New Jersey town, to the horror of its modern Jewish residents: to them, Orthodoxy is a relic of the past, a reminder of oppression, which must be shed in order to be American: Wodenton is a progressive suburban community whose members, both Jewish and Gentile, are anxious that their families live in comfort and beauty and serenity. This is, after all the twentieth century and we do not think it is too much to ask that the members of our community dress in a manner appropriate to the time and place.”

In this case, the people who incur the wrath of these townspeople are in fact immigrants; but they need not be. Might we read these new novels of religious tradition, ritual and community as immigration stories as well? Even as they posit a living religious practice, even as they features characters who are fully American, native born, many of these novels, my own included, focus on a transposition of one world onto another. “This is America, you can do what you want,” an Orthodox woman, Elizabeth Shulman, is told in Allegra Goodman’s novel, <u>Kaaterskill Falls</u>, after wrestling with whether to skirt communal religious norms. But that this needs to be said, that it is a revelation to this character, means that the character is not fully living in the place where she lives. For her, it is America and it is not America. A Jew steeped in ritual or Jewish texts and who feels bound by their words is also something of an immigrant, in time, not just in space. No

matter how many generations one's family has lived in America, to live according to Jewish law is to live in translation, with a backward glance over the shoulder at Babylonia or Vilna, back to earlier texts which are alive and binding in the present moment. This is especially true of the character who becomes observant, who travels a path of reverse immigration, undoing in some sense the course charted by those earlier characters.

I want to use one of my own characters from my second novel The Outside World as another example. In the novel, which revolves around two orthodox families, an eighteen year old named Bryan spends a post-high school year in yeshiva and to use the colloquial term, he "frums out." He returns home calling himself by his Hebrew name, Baruch, checking up on his parents' standards of kashrut, dismissive of what he terms their true religion: "Picking and choosing." He thinks that "if confronted, his parents would extol the virtues of moderation and secular education. They would talk about integrating and assimilating the best of both worlds. They would claim that math and science, art and literature also came from God. His mother would talk about faith, struggle, and doubt. His father would roll his eyes and attribute Baruch's belief to youthful extremism. If pressed, he would extol the benefits of living in two worlds. His parents wouldn't understand that he wanted one world, authentic and whole."

So steeped in the contradictions of the modern world, he is hungry for what he imagines as the authenticity of the old world. He longs for roots that go deeper than the New Jersey suburb where they live -- he "wanted to pass through Ellis Island in reverse, to

find a Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia, he was sure still existed somewhere." If the actual immigrant looks around at the new world in which he finds himself and wonders how to fit in and what price he will pay for doing so, Bryan/Baruch looks at was once his own world and wonders how to separate himself out.

In "Eli The Fanatic", the clothing of the newcomers becomes the rallying point: "if that guy would take off that crazy hat. I know it, what eats them. If he's take off that crazy hat, everything would be all right." For Baruch, he needs to put on that hat - a central way to showcase his newfound belonging is to adapt the clothing of his ultra-Orthodox world. Clothing, like language, is an identifying feature of the immigrant - but it is certainly more easily shed than an accent, and Baruch purges his room of any signs of his former self, remaking himself not in the garb of modernity but in its opposite.

Bryan/Baruch's younger sister, Ilana also bears some part of the struggles of the immigrant, particularly of how to dress when you live in conflicting but overlapping worlds. She attends a modern Orthodox day school, and after the summer vacation, a new dress code is laid out for the girls, by a teacher who "quotes the rabbis who declared what parts of them were off-limits. Baruch may have cared about what the Rabbis had to say, but Ilana had no trouble ignoring their various pronouncements. Their words had little to do with her life. But now, like arrows, they landed on the various parts of her body. She became nothing but an assemblage of forbidden parts: elbows, arms, thighs." For her, the task of living with one eye cast backward is problematic and painful: the difficulty comes in translating the codes of one world onto the realities of another. The

rabbinic rules of dress do not translate well to her American teenage urges, and so Ilana too begins the process of shedding the clothing which marks her belonging in one world.

For me, in writing of these worlds, there is an element of translation as well. In writing about traditional Judaism, for a wide audience -- even for a Jewish readership that is not necessarily knowledgeable about intricacies of Jewish ritual and tradition -- there is a continual problem of language when invoking words that go beyond challah, beyond Shabbos and shul. But to write of this world without its minute details, its specificity of language feels impossible as well. When making use of these more particularized terms, the question often arises of how much explaining to do. Inevitably as well, the question is raised as to whether to use italics to demarcate the "Jewish" words. But to italicize it is to announce to the reader that you do no know these words. They might appear here but they are not really here; it is to write in semi-translation.

The novel I've recently completed has no issue with italics. There is, in fact, little mention of Jewishness. The novel is set on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and in my mind, and in some of their last names, the characters are Jewish as a matter of course, but there is no shabbos, no shul. The novel, which began as a desire to write about motherhood, soon evolved into an examination of public and private spaces, of internal voices and external ones, making use of the city - with its walls of windows, its myriad encounters with strangers. There is too in the book a preoccupation with historical preservation and urban underground exploration and with stained glass windows -- one character, an art historian, is fixated on recovering a stained glass window made by the

artist John La Farge whose most famed work is called Christ in Majesty, and hangs in Boston's Trinity Church.

I admit, the fact that there are no shuls but several mentions of churches gives me pause, and makes me anxious. One way to deal with this anxiety is to work it into the fabric of the book - to hand it off to the art historian who inexplicably to herself finds herself drawn to these works of stained glass. And yet the question remains: Is this my novel? How did it come to be? The Jewishness of my first two novels was a given -- it was so clearly the world of the books - not the world they happened to be in, but the world they had to be in, the world that animated them, gave them life. My next next book too, which I have started to work on in the wonderful gift of space here at HBI, is on more familiar ground, in Jewish Memphis. So then how do you explain this book? I didn't set out to write a non-Jewish novel. In fact, I had assumed some more overt strand of Jewishness would work its way in - I have waited for its appearance for four years, but except in small ways, this has not happened. What I can say is simply that this is what this novel wanted to be. The questions that animate the book feel intimately my own as well.

But surely my own Jewish background, my Jewish knowledge and upbringing and engagement is present here too, even if it is only bubbling under the surface, even if only I know how to locate it. Whether the book will qualify as a "Jewish book" for the purposes of invitations to those Jewish book fairs is another matter, but I see my own continued Jewish, preoccupations present here as well: the gap between public selves and private selves, between individual freedom and communal, familial expectation, the

experience of being looked upon by others, as a means of shaping a sense of self. I feel my Jewishness present when I think, for example, about the ways in which contemporary mothering has become increasingly stringent and reliant on parenting texts, as opposed to following what one's own parents did; in thinking about this, I can't help but think about the increased stringencies in the Orthodox world, as a community becomes more reliant on texts and not on what one's own parents did. I know these themes and write of them not despite the fact that I am "really" a Jewish writer, but because I am. Those experiences, those repositories of knowledge, the reference points remain, even when the content is not explicitly Jewish. They are too much a part of my writer's self to separate out, certainly not in the moment of writing itself, when there are no strict lines or boundaries to be kept in place, no terms of identity of affiliation to be upheld.

Perhaps this too is part of the problem with the question "do you consider yourself a Jewish writer?" The problem is not with the final words, Jewish writer, but with words that innocuously sit in the middle of the sentence: "consider yourself." The work of classifying who is a Jewish writer is best left to others, but certainly not to the writer while writing - because to write fiction is to use yourself but not exactly to think of yourself - it is to attempt to free yourself from such considerations of how you will be read and where you will be shelved and on which panels you will be, or not be, asked to speak: in the moment of writing, it is to live continuously with the paradox of making use of your own self, cannibalizing your own experience really, while at the same time forcing yourself out of yourself and entering into the consciousness of imagined others. "Write what you know," some say. "Write what you must know," others say -- but what

is most true is that we do both - we know many things, many places, inside ourselves and outside ourselves, we locate ourselves in likely and unlikely worlds. The question of do you consider yourself a Jewish writer -- if it needs be answered with legal precision, rather than a series of overlapping paradoxes and contradictions -- is antithetical to the experience of writing fiction with revels in the contradictions of human experience, where there is always the straddling of messy, multiple worlds,