

# Contemporary Jewish Fiction on Abortion: Ethical Considerations from Various *Responsa* and their Absence in Recent Jewish-American Fiction

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ABSTRACT: This paper collates several major ethical considerations from *responsa* concerning abortion as pronounced by rabbinic authorities from various branches of Judaism. It then examines twentieth- and twenty-first century Jewish-American novels and short stories that concern abortion, discusses the absence of these major ethical principles in the literature, and offers insights regarding the application of these principles. Finally, it suggests the trajectory of future Jewish-American fiction *vis-à-vis* these ethical pronouncements.

JEWISH-AMERICAN FICTION concerning abortion is largely unexplored territory in literary criticism. Much is written about the abortion decision juridically, but virtually no examination of the impact of abortion in relation to rabbinic pronouncements exists either in the criticism or in the fiction itself. This literary critical gap is especially interesting since a work of fiction should respect the cultural and religious heritage that it is supposed to represent if it is to be considered a work in that category. Thus, for example, Leila Aboulela's short story "Make Your Own Way Home"<sup>1</sup> can be considered an artifact by an Islamic author who is herself faithful to Islam while her characters are bereft of a

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<sup>1</sup> Leila Aboulela, "Make Your Own Way Home," *Coloured Lights* (Edinburgh UK: Polygon, 2001), pp. 83-97.

religious basis for moral action in their lives as much as James Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*<sup>2</sup> fairly represents a family whose Catholicism is perfunctory at best.

A problem of definition could be raised at this point. While defining "abortion" as a topic in literature is unnecessary since it is self-evident, what exactly is "Jewish" fiction? Is Jewish fiction a discrete category like Catholic fiction or Islamic fiction? Is Jewish fiction to be bifurcated into secularized American and Orthodox Israeli halves? This problem of definition has been an issue for academics and critics for decades, most probably in response to the effects of assimilation of immigrants as their children intermarried with a dominantly Christian American population. After commenting on the work of Abraham Cahan, Emma Lazarus, and some nineteenth-century authors, Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer attempt a definition in their 2003 collection of essays, *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, by saying:

Each wrote what might be called "Jewish American literature." But it is problematic to say that they belonged to a common literary tradition.... This makes the task of the literary historian difficult indeed. Ruth Wisse has argued that "modern Jewish literature is the repository of modern Jewish experience" and, as such, "the most complete way of knowing the inner life of the Jews". ... Yet the phrase "modern Jewish experience" is hardly self-evident, and knowing "the inner life of the Jews" no simple matter, particularly in America.<sup>3</sup>

For purposes of this study, however, "Jewish-American fiction" on the topic of abortion will include novels and short stories written by authors who are either identified as adherents of the Jewish religion or categorized as Jewish by critics. This latter stipulation thus includes secularized, non-religious Jews.

The structure of the paper uses the following format. The five ethical

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<sup>2</sup> James T. Farrell, *Studs Lonigan: A Trilogy containing Young Lonigan, The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan, Judgment Day, with an introduction and a new epilogue by the author* (New York NY: Vanguard, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* (Cambridge UK: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

principles regarding abortion in Jewish religious thought will be identified before advancing to a critical commentary on abortion in Jewish-American fiction. Three fictional works will then be examined: Sheila Schwartz's 2009 novel *Lies Will Take You Somewhere*,<sup>4</sup> Allegra Goodman's 1990 short story "Variant Text,"<sup>5</sup> and Saul Bellow's 1953 novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the trajectory of Jewish-American fiction on abortion will be suggested.

#### FIVE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES ON ABORTION IN JEWISH RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

An overview of rabbinic pronouncements, or *responsa* (the singular being *responsum*), on abortion is necessary before a review of contemporary criticism of Jewish-American fiction can be provided. These *responsa* decide moral and ethical questions brought to the rabbis for their adjudication *vis-à-vis* Talmudic and other authorities. Much as in the tradition of case law, the *responsum* of one rabbi will build on the work of previous *responsa* and either agree, refine, or reject previous decisions. While abortion is a relatively recent social problem in the United States (one can argue that its political and judicial appearance is only half a century old), rabbis have discussed abortion for millennia, and their commentary has been substantial.

The pronouncements can be sorted into five categories.<sup>7</sup> While the five ethical principles that inform the religious thinking of Judaism on

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<sup>4</sup> Sheila Schwartz, *Lies Will Take You Somewhere* (Wilkes-Barre PA: Etruscan Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Allegra Goodman, "Variant Text" in *The Schocken Book of Contemporary Jewish Fiction*, ed. Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport (New York NY: Schocken Books, 1992), pp. 86-109.

<sup>6</sup> Saul Bellow, *Novels 1944-1953: Dangling Man; The Victim; The Adventures of Augie March* (New York NY: Library Classics of the United States, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> There is a sixth ethical aspect, ensoulment, the point at which the soul enters the body. Although the theory of ensoulment developed over thousands of years, the main lines of discussion of this aspect can be generally traced to pagan sources. While Christianity contributed much to the discussion of ensoulment, Judaism has had little to say about this ethical aspect.

abortion are treated at greater length elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> the following will summarize discussion of the principles across the major branches of Judaism.

#### A. The *Lex Talionis*

The first aspect is the *lex talionis*, found in Exodus. It explicitly mentions miscarriage but is also the basis for religious thinking on abortion:

When men have a fight and hurt a pregnant woman, so that she suffers a miscarriage, but no further injury, the guilty one shall be fined as much as the woman's husband demands of him, and he shall pay in the presence of the judges. But if injury ensues, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (Exodus 21: 22-25)

Frequently, critique of the *lex talionis* seems more linguistic than doctrinal. Orthodox Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits argues that “this crucial passage, by one of the most curious twists of literary fortunes, marks the parting of the ways between the Jewish and Christian rulings on abortion.”<sup>9</sup> According to Jakobovits, the key phrase in Hebrew is usually translated as “no harm follow” (in the above translation it is rendered “no further injury”) but “was replaced by the Greek for ‘[her child be born] imperfectly formed.’”<sup>10</sup> For Jakobovits, the import of the original translation is clear. Since only someone born could be considered fully human, the fetus is not considered a legal person who could be murdered. Rabbi Moshe Zemer affirmed this idea in his 1999 compendium on contemporary controversial matters *Evolving Halakhah: A Progressive Approach to Traditional Jewish Law*: “Because a fetus is not considered to be a person, the concept of murder does not apply as long as it has not

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<sup>8</sup> Please consult relevant chapters in my *An Ethical Analysis of the Portrayal of Abortion in American Fiction: Dreiser, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Brautigan, and Irving* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Jakobovits, “Jewish Views on Abortion,” *Western Reserve Law Review* 17 (1965): 483.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 484.

emerged into the air of the world.”<sup>11</sup>

Conservative Rabbi David M. Feldman elaborates on this matter when he writes in his influential 1968 monograph *Birth Control in Jewish Law* that the *lex talionis*

tells us, in the words of a modern writer on Roman and Jewish law, that in both systems the foetus has no “juridical personality” of its own. Slightly more relevant is the factor of “doubtful viability” that attaches to an embryo: it is not reckoned a *bar kayyama* [a viable, living thing] until thirty days after its birth – unless a full nine-month pregnancy is definitely known to have been completed.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Jewish law is more concerned with the legal culpability of the person who causes a miscarriage than it is with the matter of abortion or the status of the unborn child.

Research by L. E. Goodman suggests that other influences can account for the change in terminology of the Exodus passage. Goodman's argument for the historical change in the *lex talionis* is extensive:

The Pentateuch does not directly consider the possibility of an intentionally induced abortion.... The reason is not far to seek: it is beyond the moral horizon of the community the Law initially addresses to expect that a father or a mother might consider intentionally aborting a foetus.... In this context the solitary and oblique reference to abortion in Exodus is all the more striking, since it shows us that aborticide, even through an assault, is not biblically deemed a homicide – although fatal injury to the expectant mother, as a result of the same incident, would be. But in the Hellenistic period, contact of Jews with the ideas and practices of other nations regarding abortion and infanticide put the matter in a different light.... Here

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<sup>11</sup> Moshe Zemer, *Evolving Halakhah: A Progressive Approach to Traditional Jewish Law* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 1999), p. 337. Zemer further cautions that, instead of “the unholy alliance of religion and politics,” Jews “need moral spiritual guidance – not fraudulent political slogans like ‘murder of fetuses’” (p. 338).

<sup>12</sup> David M. Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law: Marital Relations, Contraception, and Abortion as Set Forth in the Classic Texts of Jewish Law: An Examination of the Relevant Precepts of the Talmud, Codes, Commentaries, and especially Rabbinic Responsa through the Present Day, with Comparative Reference to the Christian Exegetical Tradition* (New York NY: New York Univ. Press, 1968), p. 254.

the Greek glosses the Hebrew with a clear bias towards finding an authority for the sanctity of human life, even before birth. It dissolves the mention of “other harm” into a disjunctive reference to the interests of the formed or unformed foetus, rather than the mother, whose interests it presumes to be already covered by the laws of assault, homicide and injury.<sup>13</sup>

Despite differences in the reception and interpretation of the *lex talionis*, a remarkable consistency on the matter of abortion is maintained in Jewish law. The Talmud is much more concerned with the ritual purification of the pregnant woman who has miscarried than with codifying the legal or theological status of the unborn child.

#### B. “Health” and “Life”

“Health” and “life” are the two terms that, when combined, constitute the second aspect of concern to Jewish authorities formulating abortion positions. Jewish scholars have added particular insights to the Talmudic commentary on health matters, not only as it relates to the *lex talionis* but also to general ethical norms that pertain to abortion. For example, Jakobovits argues that a passage in Exodus antecedent to the *lex talionis* determines which of the two principles has more weight and thus constitutes the spiritual foundation for Judaism’s practical concern for health:

While modern medicine is above all therapeutic in its aims, Hebrew medicine received, at its origin, a different orientation by this biblical verse: “If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His sight, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians, for I am the Lord that healeth thee” (Exodus xv, 26). This declaration has the value of a veritable program. With this declaration as their basis, many Jewish thinkers who are considered authorities recognized and demonstrated the prophylactic effect of a series of religious laws of primary importance, such as, notably, those concerning

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<sup>13</sup> L. E. Goodman, “Abortion and the Emergence of Human Life: Maimonides and the Judaic View” in *Bits of Honey: Essays for Samson H. Levey*, ed, Stanley F. Chyet and David H. Ellenson, Series: South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 176-77.

food and the purity of conjugal life.<sup>14</sup>

From this basis of health as having a priority over life itself, Judaism has not only allowed but in some cases mandated abortion because the health of the pregnant woman is “the sole indication for terminating a pregnancy.”<sup>15</sup>

The most important sections dealing with feticide can be found in Maimonides and Joseph ben Ephraim Karo. According to Rabbi Solomon Ganzfried’s translation of *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh*, Maimonides provides several reasons for justifying feticide:

When a woman has severe pain in childbirth, the physician is permitted to destroy the child before its birth, either with medicine or with instruments, for as long as it has not yet been born, it is not considered a living soul, and it is permissible to save the mother by sacrificing the child; it is akin to a case of self-defense. However, as soon as it protrudes its head, it must not be touched, for one living soul must not be sacrificed to save another, and this is the way of nature.<sup>16</sup>

The relevant section of Karo’s code pertaining to abortion reads much more concisely:

If a pregnant woman cannot give birth to a child naturally, and it is impossible for the doctor to save both lives, or in order to give birth to a live child the mother must die, or in order to save the mother’s life the child must be killed, it is permitted to cut the child in pieces and save the life of

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<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Jakobovits, *Jewish Medical Ethics: A Comparative and Historical Study of the Jewish Religious Attitude to Medicine and Its Practice* (New York NY: Philosophical Library, [1959]), p. xxi.

<sup>15</sup> M. D. Tandler, *Medical Ethics: A Compendium of Jewish Moral, Ethical and Religious Principles in Medical Practice*, 5th ed. (New York NY: Committee on Religious Affairs, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, 1975), p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Solomon Ganzfried, *Code of Jewish Law: Kitzur Shulhan Arukh: A Compilation of Jewish Laws and Customs*, annotated revised edition, translated by Hyman E. Goldin (New York NY: Hebrew Press, 1991 [1963]), vol. 4, p. 78.

the mother.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, since mental health can be just as important as physical health, Judaism can justify abortion on the same basis as it justifies contraception.<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Mordechai Winkler affirmed in his 1913 *responsum* that the “mental-health risk has been definitely equated with physical-health risk. [A] woman, in danger of losing her mental health unless the pregnancy is interrupted, would therefore accordingly qualify” for an abortion.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for example, while Tay-Sachs would be harmful only to the unborn child, the pregnant woman could abort if she were to claim that her mental health would be impaired.<sup>20</sup> Later twentieth-century Reform *responsa* have similarly adopted this reasoning for abortion in such cases. Rabbi Emeritus Solomon B. Freehof, for instance, determined in 1973 that the abortion of a child “born imperfect physically, and even mentally” is permitted “for the *mother’s* sake (i.e., her mental anguish now and in the future).”<sup>21</sup> Sandra B. Lubarsky expanded the circumstances for permitting abortion in 1984 by arguing that:

By “medically advised” abortion I mean the traditional “therapeutic” abortion, that is, abortion for the purpose of preserving the life of the mother, a definition that was often broadened to include any severe threat to the mother’s physical health, and less often included a threat to the mother’s mental health. By “non-medically advised” abortion I mean abortion that is justified by ecological, sociological, economic, emotional, or intellectual reasons. These reasons may be predicated upon such current

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph ben Ephraim Karo, *Jewish Code of Jurisprudence: Talmudical Law Decisions: Civil, Criminal and Social*, 3 vols., translated by J. L. Kadushin (New Rochelle NY: Jewish Jurisprudence, 1917-1923), 1:428a.

<sup>18</sup> David M. Feldman, *Health and Medicine in the Jewish Tradition: L’Hayyim -- to Life* (New York NY: Crossroad, 1986), p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> David M. Feldman, “This Matter of Abortion” in *Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality: A Reader*, ed. Elliott N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman (New York NY and Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 389.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Solomon B. Freehof, *Reform Responsa and Recent Reform Responsa*. (New York NY: Ktav, 1973), p. 193 (emphasis in original).



concerns as pollution, overpopulation, and male and female liberation.<sup>22</sup>

### C. The Unborn Child as “Aggressor”

While the focus of the preceding aspect was the health and life of the pregnant woman, the third ethical aspect that informs discussion of abortion determines whether the unborn child is an aggressor against his or her mother. In Judaism an unborn child can be considered a *rodef* (a “pursuer” or “aggressor”) against the mother if there is difficulty in birth that necessitates abortion. This is the only consideration given to justify abortion in Talmudic writings. Section 7.6 of *Oholoth* (the tractate in the Babylonian Talmud that is concerned with ritual impurity caused by contact with corpses, either by touch or by being in proximity with a corpse) reads:

If a woman was in hard travail, the child must be cut up while it is in the womb and brought out member by member, since the life of the mother has priority over the life of the child; but if the greater part of it was already born, it may not be touched, since the claim of one life cannot override the claim of another life.<sup>23</sup>

An unborn child can become a *rodef*, Feldman insists, if he or she seems to “pursue” the life of the mother. The *rodef* principle was amplified by Maimonides in his *Law of Homicide* (1:9) as follows:

This is also a negative precept, namely, not to have compassion on the life of a pursuer. Therefore, the Sages ruled regarding a pregnant woman in hard travail, that it is permissible to dismember the fetus in her womb, whether by means of drugs or by hand, but if it has already put forth its head, it may not be touched, for one life may not be set aside for the sake of another one and this is the natural course of the world.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Sandra B. Lubarsky, “Judaism and the Justification of Abortion for Nonmedical Reasons” in *Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality*, ed. Elliott N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman (New York NY and Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 392.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (London UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), p. 660.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Sinclair, p. 203.

Critical evaluation of the *rodef* concept becomes more complicated because Maimonides uses a simile (*k'rodef*, “like a pursuer”) to compare the unborn child to an aggressor.<sup>25</sup> On the importance of this simile, L. E. Goodman writes:

As Novak explains, “This is why Maimonides emphasized that the fetus is ‘like’ a pursuer” – not that it literally *is* an aggressor, with the deserts of a person that may be set aside because of an intentional threat, but because it has material deserts of its own, which approach those of personhood and ultimately reach those of personhood at the point of birth.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Feldman, “This Matter,” p. 387.

<sup>26</sup> L. E. Goodman, p. 182 (emphasis in original). Daniel B. Sinclair examines the pursuer principle in greater detail, arguing that it is not a license to destroy, but a source of protection for the unborn child: “This formulation is problematic in that the pursuer principle ought to apply to a baby after birth and not only prior to the emergence of the head. It ought to be permissible to kill a baby whose head has already emerged, if by so doing, the mother’s life will be saved. Nevertheless, Maimonides restricts therapeutic abortion to the period prior to the head emerging from the woman’s body. Moreover, the application of the pursuer principle to therapeutic abortion during childbirth would appear to be specifically rejected in the Babylonian Talmud. In addition to these internal inconsistencies, the very analogy between a fetus and a pursuer is open to question. Surely, an important element in the pursuer principle is that the pursuer intends killing the individual being pursued! Is this the case in relation to a fetus? Does not Maimonides himself admit that the threat to maternal life is the result of ‘the natural course of the world’? These difficulties have exercised many scholars, and the general consensus would appear to be that Maimonides adopted a strictness in relation to feticide which requires a stronger justification for therapeutic abortion than the claim that the fetus is not a person. The pursuer principle serves, therefore, as a reminder that fetal life is not to be taken lightly, even in a therapeutic context. Maimonides uses the pursuer analogy in order to shift the starting position from the nonpersonhood of the fetus to the proposition that the decision to kill a fetus is similar to the one made to kill a formed, viable pursuer. In the same way that great care is taken before the latter decision is operated on, so the former one ought only to be put into operation when all other options have failed. In this manner, Maimonides builds the natural-law/Noahide principle of protection of life into the very source of the permission to perform therapeutic abortions in Jewish law.” Sinclair, “Maimonides’ Approach to Jewish Bioethics in the Areas of the Treatment of the Critically Ill and Abortion” in *Moses Maimonides: Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher*, ed. Fred Rosner and Samuel S. Kottke (Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), pp. 203-04.

#### D. “Potentiality” and “Actuality”

The fourth aspect consists of another pair of terms that denote different but mutually dependent concepts: whether the unborn child possesses “potential” or “actual” life. Feldman argues that Judaism’s understanding of the potentiality of human life is based on authorities who argue that

there is no permission for Sabbath violation in order to save a foetus.... Two points, then, are suggested by this exchange: the foetus is not a person, not “a man”; but the foetus is indeed potential life and is to be treated as such, which is essentially the teaching that emerges from our other analyses.<sup>27</sup>

Determining whether the unborn child is a potential or an actual human being can be further complicated in Judaism by the use of “viability,” a modern rendering of the potentiality concept. For example, Balfour Brickner, Director of the Department of Inter-Religious Affairs of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, used rhetorical negation to define the unborn child in testimony before the U.S. Senate in 1974:

Jewish law is quite clear in its statement that an embryo is not reckoned a viable living thing (in Hebrew, a *bar kayyama*) until thirty days after its birth.... In Judaism the fetus in the womb is not a person (*lav nefesh hu* [he is not a person]) until it is born.<sup>28</sup>

#### E. “Formed” and “Unformed” Fetuses

The fifth aspect investigates whether another pair of terms (“formed” and “unformed”) that aim further to classify the status of the unborn child and to determine the permissibility of abortion within Judaism. Jewish scholars incorporated the Aristotelian view that formation of the male or female fetus depends on whether forty or eighty days had elapsed. According to Feldman:

Another distinction gives *the first forty days* of pregnancy a special

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<sup>27</sup> Feldman, *Birth*, pp. 263-64.

<sup>28</sup> Balfour Brickner, “Judaism and Abortion” in *Contemporary Jewish Ethics*, ed. Menachem Marc Kellner (New York NY: Sanhedrin Press, 1978), pp. 280-81.

status...all the more notable because the status of so undeveloped a foetus is precarious indeed. According to one statement in the Talmud, this is the stage of “mere liquid.” The fortieth day is when the embryo “forms,” according to other Talmudic references, just as Aristotle and Roman jurisprudence had assumed.<sup>29</sup>

The distinction between a “formed” and an “unformed” fetus, and the resulting philosophical question of personhood for the unborn child if he or she has not yet reached a certain gestational age, may be based on a misinterpretation of the *lex talionis*. Feldman has demonstrated that

The word in question is *ason*, which we have rendered as “harm,” hence: “if [there be] no harm [i.e., death, to the mother], he shall be fined.” ... The Greek renders the word *ason* as “form,” yielding something like: “if [there be] no form [yet, to the foetus], he shall be fined.... But if [there be] form, then shalt thou give life for life.” The “life for life” clause was thus applied to the foetus instead of the mother, and a distinction was made – as Augustine will formulate it – between *embryo informatus* and *embryo formatus*, a foetus not yet “formed” and one already “formed.”<sup>30</sup>

Apparently, the distinction between formed and unformed still has some force within Judaism, the applicability of which can be illustrated by two representative twentieth-century *responsa*. The following recommendation is offered for Orthodox Jews by S.I. Levin and Edward A. Boyden in their 1940 compendium:

When a woman discharges a sac (*shafir*) full of water or full of blood, or full of various colors, there is no fear of a child (*walad*), but if it is articulated (*merukam*) [i.e., distinctive enough to suggest an embryo], she should “sit to a male and to a female” [i.e., avoid intercourse until her period of purification has elapsed – in this case a compromise between that required for a female child (40 days) and that for a male (80 days; see Lev. 12:2-8), as set forth in *Niddah* 25b].<sup>31</sup>

Reform Judaism adopts the ancient view regarding the forty days after

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<sup>29</sup> Feldman, *Birth*, p. 266 (italics in original).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257-58.

<sup>31</sup> S. I. Levin and Edward A. Boyden, *The Kosher Code of the Orthodox Jew* (New York NY: Hermon Press, 1940, rev. 1968), p. 128.

fertilization as a decisive aspect to consider. In his *Contemporary American Reform Responsa* (1987) Rabbi Walter Jacob writes that

traditional authorities would be most lenient with abortions within the first forty days. After that time, there is a difference of opinion. Those who are within the broadest range of permissibility permit abortion at any time before birth, if there is a serious danger to the health of the mother or the child. We would be in agreement with that liberal stance.<sup>32</sup>

#### CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON ABORTION IN JEWISH FICTION

While a large quantity of commentary on Jewish-American fiction addressing significant cultural topics exists, critical commentary on fiction concerning the issue of abortion in that literature is scarce. Early critical summaries of the literature enumerated long lists of topics that concern Jewish writers. Commentary by Meyer Levin in a 1970 anthology of selections from major works by Jewish authors praises the multi-volume saga of the Polonsky family written by his co-editor Charles Angoff saying,

Almost every major aspect of Jewish life is dealt with in the saga: Zionism, socialism, atheism (straight and devout), unionism, religious intermarriage, politics (within the Jewish community and in relation to the “outside” American community), anti-Semitism, education (both religious and “worldly”), Hasidism, secularism, assimilation, the Jew in industry, in business large and small.<sup>33</sup>

Absent from the list is abortion, the most important social problem that percolated through the sixties, often at the insistence of activists who based their beliefs on the primacy of abortion solely as a right of the

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<sup>32</sup> Walter Jacob, *Contemporary American Reform Responsa* (New York NY: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1987), p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Meyer Levin, *The Rise of American Jewish Literature: An Anthology of Selections from the Major Novels*, ed. Charles Angoff and Meyer Levin (New York NY: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 69.

mother and who were often classified as Jewish.<sup>34</sup>

While the editors of a 1992 anthology note the caution that seemed to preclude Jewish writers from becoming too political, Ted Solotaroff relegates specific new subjects in contemporary Jewish fiction to speculation:

Now that American-Jewish fiction has achieved a comparable freedom, resourcefulness, and diversity, as reflected in this collection, the question of its further development may well rest on its ability to put the dimming concerns of the post-immigrant ethos even farther behind it and to take up those of our deep and open present.<sup>35</sup>

This speculation about the “deep and open present,” apparently does not include abortion. If it did, the topic and other controversial ones could have been explicitly mentioned, especially in the politically safe 1990s, when nine-month legalized abortion seemed to have been firmly established in American culture. The closest the editors come to suggesting without explicitly mentioning abortion is their recognition of the impact of feminism on Jewish life.<sup>36</sup>

Janet Handler Burstein references abortion on one of the two hundred

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<sup>34</sup> Raymond Adamek’s studies of abortion activists (reported in “Abortion Activists: Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behavior,” typescript of 31 January 1985) show that “Catholics were overrepresented by 2 to 3 times among proliferers, while Jews were 3 to 14 times overrepresented among prochoicers” (pp. 2-3). Since this research was conducted in 1985, demographic analysis of abortion activists is an area needing current research.

<sup>35</sup> Ted Solotaroff, “The Open Community” in *The Schocken Book of Contemporary Jewish Fiction*, ed. Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport (New York NY: Schocken Books, 1992), p. xxvi. He had earlier written that “it is passing strange that fiction writers – and this is true of novelists as well as story writers – have steered clear of the fascinating roles and conflicts that Jews play out in contemporary society. One can, of course, view this dearth as part of the general withdrawal of interest from political, economic, social, and intellectual concerns in recent American writing, and though the point has been made many times before, it still seems worth addressing to American-Jewish writers whose European forebears in this century so frequently transported the Jewish interest in politics and society into literature.” *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

pages of her *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters: Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American Jewish Women* (1996). The passage recounts the effects of post-abortion syndrome in Tess Slesinger's *Unpossessed* (1934) more than it demonstrates, in standardized feminist literary critical vocabulary, the assertion of women's rights over their subjugation by patriarchal forces:

In the final chapter, one female protagonist whose mother's voice and image were previously clear and formative, returns home with her husband after an abortion to realize that – despite their intellectual and political commitments – “in each of them the life-stream flowed to a dead-end.” This woman had always defined herself by her power to nurture, to protect, to love. But now that she has followed her husband's lead, refusing parenthood in order to avoid becoming “bourgeois,” she sees herself “as a creature who would not be a woman and could not be a man.”<sup>37</sup>

Commentary by Glenda Abramson in another 1996 volume, *The Oxford Book of Hebrew Short Stories*, indicates that the hesitancy to address controversial social issues is not restricted to North America. Discussing young women writers who should be most vocal about asserting either an anti-life feminist view towards abortion or the pro-life one, Abramson notes that

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<sup>37</sup> Janet Handler Burstein, *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters: Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American Jewish Women* (Urbana IL and Chicago IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 60. Burstein's reticence about mentioning abortion, a significant element of feminist liberation from the 1960s and 1970s that should appear in the works discussed, is troubling. Perhaps Simone de Beauvoir's views about maternity being a burden to women and the intellectual consequence of such a claim *vis-à-vis* abortion could not have been mentioned in the critical analysis of some Jewish fiction. The omission of abortion as a significant action by the main character in Violet Weingarten's 1967 novel *Mrs. Beneker*, however, is inexcusable, especially since the “protagonist manifests a curious, troubling combination of devaluing influences left over from the fifties and spiritual longing that would not find political expression among Jewish women until the seventies” (pp. 94-95). She notes that “[t]he novel thus demonstrates that what Horney called the ‘quest for affection’ is as ineffective against devaluation as the ‘quest for control’” (p. 97). Mr. Beneker paid for the abortion of her son's girlfriend, an important subplot in Beneker's own self-discovery.

Today's post-modernist female writers are not afraid to deal with female experience in a strongly and traditionally male-dominated literary society, taking the principal components of Israeli literature and recasting them, often with underlying hostility, from a woman's perspective. They withdraw from the so-called "Zionist experience"; if they do contend with Jewish or Israeli experience, it is made abstract, almost as a protest against the customary engagement with social issues.<sup>38</sup>

Although it focuses on the ancestral homeland of Israel as a topic in Jewish-American writing, Andrew Furman's 1997 volume suggests other contemporary social issues of concern:

To be sure, American Jews continue to grapple on their own distinct terms with a host of mainstream issues. I am thinking, specifically, of the heightened tensions between Jewish and African Americans, the influx of Russian Jews into Jewish-American neighborhoods, the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, the curious alliance between Jewish neoconservatives and the Christian right, and, of course, the turmoil in the Middle East.<sup>39</sup>

Although hinted at by the reference to the "curious alliance" between Christians and Jews, abortion and reproductive matters are neglected in this litany as well. Describing an "alliance" as "curious" suggests that a political or ideological bias exists that would preclude objective analysis of life issues in the literature.

Critical silence about abortion in Jewish-American fiction has continued in this first decade of the new millennium. *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* (2003) indexes neither abortion nor persons of Jewish heritage whose views and actions played major roles in the legalization of abortion (for example, Bernard Nathanson) or groups that agitated for abortion legalization (the National Abortion Rights Action League or Planned Parenthood).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Glenda Abramson, ed., *The Oxford Book of Hebrew Short Stories* (Oxford UK and New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Furman, *Israel Through the Jewish-American Imagination: A Survey of Jewish-American Literature on Israel, 1928-1995* (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997), p. 200.

<sup>40</sup> To the anthology's credit, the abortion episode in Bellow's *Adventures of Augie March* is mentioned.



## EXAMINATION OF THE LITERATURE

Despite the relative paucity of critical discussion on abortion in Jewish fiction, what fictional representation of the issue exists is substantial in the repetition of certain characteristics; furthermore, a unifying term for all of them is “absence.”<sup>41</sup> The status of the unborn child is not suggested, if he or she is even mentioned at all. Similarly, the rights and responsibilities of the father in abortion decisions is subordinate to the rights of the mother; usually, though, he is absent from the abortion episodes. References to rabbinic decisions or principles is non-existent. Reviewing three recent works may illustrate these characteristics better. Moreover, to understand how the ethical principles are treated in the literature, one would normally proceed in chronological order to show how the accomplishments of one author may have influenced another. In this instance, however, one must proceed in reverse chronological order, moving from twenty-first century authors who have either ignored, were ignorant of, or did not know how to incorporate the ethical principles within their religious tradition to one of the twentieth-century masters

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<sup>41</sup> Some references to abortion or infanticide are relatively minor. For example, Letty Cottin Pogrebin’s short story “I Don’t Like to Write About My Father” in *Nice Jewish Girls: Growing up in America*, ed. Marlene Adler Marks (New York NY: Plume, 1996), pp. 261-77, contains the briefest annotation that the main character’s abortion “costs [her] father \$350 but I pay him back. / It takes me five years, but I pay him every penny” (p. 276). Similarly, Erica Jong’s *Inventing Memory: A Novel of Mothers and Daughters* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 1997) concerns infanticide more than abortion. Sarah had killed her baby to prevent her death during a pogrom (p. 3); another instance of infanticide is mentioned early in the beginning of the novel (p. 40). However, another passage is a celebration of life (p. 125), followed by a proclamation that the characters will not let death win (p. 126). Because of this assertion, it is easy to see how she quickly rules out abortion when he becomes pregnant (p. 185), even though she vowed never to have another child (p. 183). The leftist political commentary in the novel, however, is inescapable. “Hitler? Ronald Reagan?” (p. 141) and a bias against the Christian Coalition (p. 292) do not comport with the high ethical position of celebrating life and affirming that she “will not let death win” (p. 126). Finally, Karolina, the main character in Eva Mekler’s *The Polish Woman* (Bridgehampton NY: Bridge Works Press, 2007), had aborted (p. 57), but the fact of her abortion is discovered over thirty pages later (p. 90). Moreover, the plot of the novel concerns a claim on an inheritance more than any of the life issues.

whose writing is rich territory for such an analysis.

A. Sheila Schwartz's *Lies Will Take You Somewhere* (2009)

Sheila Schwartz's *Lies Will Take You Somewhere* (2009) uses abortion more as a plot-development tool than an essential matter in a study of adultery and a married woman's effort to discover herself. Jane abandons her family (her husband Saul, who is a rabbi, and three daughters) in New York and goes to Florida where she tries not only to re-examine her relationship with her recently deceased mother but also to determine her future, specifically whether she would be content to remain in her relatively placid life. While there, she learns much to her horror that her mother had worked with a pro-life group in distributing pamphlets. Jane falls in love with the group's leader, Tony, a charismatic person who lives in squalor and who is aggressive in his sexuality. She becomes pregnant by him and aborts the child. Jane eventually returns to New York, becomes pregnant by her husband, and bears that child. Some catharsis or plot closure is thus realized.

An opportunity could exist for exploration and examination of rabbinic counsel regarding abortion (Saul, after all, is a rabbi). There are no health considerations to consider, for Jane is, by all accounts, young and healthy physically. One could argue that her adulterous behavior is a sign of mental or psychological collapse, which could justify the abortion of the child, according to Lubarsky. But there is no evidence that Jane either feels so psychologically distraught that the pregnancy could not be carried to term or that she considers herself a victim of rape since she consents to Tony's aggressive sexuality and lingers with him in his poverty. No other ethical principle is expressly offered as a factor when she considers abortion.

Saul's role is non-existent regarding the killing of Tony's child and ambiguous regarding the paternal foundation of his own. Saul mourns profoundly over the space of fourteen pages the death of his daughter Malkah, who committed suicide, yet his involvement in his wife's pending abortion decision is, at best, remote. No better example of a Jewish father who does not evince patriarchy can be found than Saul's query to his wife: "We *are* having this baby, aren't we?"<sup>42</sup> The use of the

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<sup>42</sup> Schwartz, p. 292.

first-person is a relatively flaccid assertion (because it is powerless and without effect) to indicate that he wants to include himself in the generation of the child. Moreover, the use of the interrogative is an inferior way to assert his authority; if he had authority, he would have used the declarative sentence function instead. Perhaps the clearest reinforcement of Saul's lack of fatherly input, let alone control, in the abortion decision is that after Jane aborted Tony's child and becomes pregnant by Saul, she names the child after another lover she had before going to Florida. Jane's whorish activities can lead a reader to ask: What man, except an emasculated one, would have stood for that?

#### B. Allegra Goodman's "Variant Text" (1990)

Although abortion is only briefly mentioned, Allegra Goodman's 1990 short story "Variant Text" concerns the desire to live faithfully according to Jewish precepts without the philosophical and ritual certainty of, for example, Orthodox Judaism. One episode in the story, however, is significant as an entree into understanding the main character: Cecil Birnbaum, a Shavian scholar who holds an important position as a Torah reader but who is agnostic.

When Cecil comes to shul wearing an "ABORTION RIGHTS" pin (capital letters in original), the following interchange occurs with George Lewis, a fellow member of the congregation "who found the variant text of *Major Barbara* and was written up in *Shavian Studies*."<sup>43</sup> Lewis calls Cecil's button "extremely offensive," to which Cecil retorts:

"Do you now? ... Well, if we are to be perfectly candid, I found your little book rather offensive. I can imagine that twenty years ago, a book like yours could accrue some kind reviews and perhaps earn you a lectureship at York. But at this time, at a point when the whole question of the variant text has ceased to be an issue, when it is acknowledged – universally acknowledged, as far as I'm concerned – that every variant is equally valid, when the very concept of a normative, authoritative text has been discarded, I am simply at a loss to understand how your book could contribute anything to the field."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Allegra Goodman, p. 102.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-03.

Lewis responds to this critical challenge thus:

“This congregation is not a place for statements, political or otherwise. This is a holy place. A place for family. And I will say this: If you utter a word in *Shavian Studies* challenging my work, I am prepared to write a letter such as the pages of that review have never seen.”<sup>45</sup>

The interchange is noteworthy for the absence of rabbinic considerations of the ethical principles, on either side. Cecil could have advanced various permissive *responsa* on abortion (which would have been a supremely intelligent move, a form of using the “oppressors’ words against the oppressors,” in this case the weight of millennia-old *responsa* against the rabbis themselves). But admitting the conclusions of rabbis on the abortion issue over the millennia would have been counter to Cecil’s intellectual being, since *responsa* are themselves variant texts of a master entry (the *lex talionis*) and since Cecil expressly states the validity of every text, which could frustrate his argument since *responsa* that do not permit abortion would need to be included as well as permissive ones. Similarly, Lewis could have argued that the validity factor has not been overcome by deconstructionist equalization of “every view is just as valid as every other” by pointing out the strong logical arguments that rabbis have used either for or against abortion over the millennia. Granted, a thorough discussion of the various *responsa* could have contorted the short story from a work of fiction to a tract, but mentioning the ancient history of competing claims on the topic of abortion would not have detracted from Lewis’s character. On the contrary, it would have supported him as an exemplar of Jewish patriarchy, which (had that been the author’s intention) would have made the characterizations of the two men clearer.

Moreover, speaking in the tired guise of contemporary literary criticism, especially from the extremist subjective reader-response perspective, one could consider Lewis’s response as a manifestation of the patriarchal need to assert the validity of one interpretation over others. However, it is more important to comment from a Marxist literary perspective on the competing ideologies present in the excerpt. That the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

declaratives “This is a holy place. A place for family” are frontloaded in Lewis’s response lessens their rhetorical force since what the reader sees next is verbal pugilism (whether as a deliberate choice by the author or not is unknown). For Cecil, the agnostic, a political statement – especially an egregiously and violently worded one like his (note that the pin does not read the euphemistic “Freedom of Choice” but “Abortion Rights”) – is entirely permitted on a sacred site, primarily because he does not acknowledge either the sacredness of that site or the divine being for whom the site is sanctified. Cecil’s anti-life position can be easily determined from this philosophical point. If he is uncertain that a divine being exists, then disclaiming the certainty of the sacredness of the temple leads ineluctably to an uncertainty that the unborn child is a creation of the divine. Unfortunately, for Cecil, he does not grant the unborn child the benefit of the doubt but concludes that the child’s rights are subject to those of his or her mother. How appropriate, then, that his response to Lewis’s being offended by the presence of the anti-life button is acerbic, a typical personality trait of those who do not appreciate the value of human life.

C. Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953)

The abortion episode in Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) follows fictional situations of other, non-Jewish contemporaries – so much so that it is almost impossible to claim that Bellow’s characters demonstrate a Jewish perspective on the issue. Just as major writers like Dreiser, Hemingway, and Dos Passos approached abortion from a secularist perspective and rarely addressed the common ethical aspects enumerated above, Bellow’s characters are concerned not with an untimely pregnancy *vis-à-vis* Jewish religious directives, but with how to remedy what they call a “problem” of an unwanted child.

Augie March is not callous emotionally. He is sensitive to those less fortunate. The son of an absent “traveling salesman” father, Augie and his family are accustomed to poverty and the vicissitudes of their economic situation. Matching the family’s financial poverty is the paucity of their religious life. They are nominally Jewish, and Augie receives no formal religious instruction throughout his life. Before the pivotal abortion sequence, Augie’s childhood and adolescent ethical education consists of admonitions not to get a whore in “trouble” and an episode with a

pederast.<sup>46</sup>

The abortion episode involves Mimi, Augie's fellow boarder, who describes her condition in the uncouth language of "Frazer knocked me up."<sup>47</sup> When Augie suggests that she could marry Frazer, her refusal to entertain such an option includes the standard metonymic reduction of the unborn child: "If I wouldn't marry him before, why should I now because of an accident?"<sup>48</sup> A page later, Augie does not reference Talmudic concerns or the ethical principles, but summarizes a catalog of technological innovations on ways to abort:

But what she wanted to discuss over coffee was a new method of abortion she had heard about. She had already tried drugs like ergoapiol, with walking, climbing stairs, and hot baths, and now one of the waitresses at the co-op told her of a doctor near Logan Square who brought on miscarriages by injection.<sup>49</sup>

Mimi's subsequent response is essentially a brief dialogue that compacts virtually all of the ethical aspects:

"But even if I could be sure I'd have a son like you..., why should I get into this routine? So the souls of these things shouldn't get after me when I die and accuse me of not letting them be born? I'd tell them, 'Listen, stop haunting me. What do you think you ever were? Why, a kind of little scallop, that's all. You don't know how lucky you are. What makes you think you would have liked it? Take it from me, you're indignant because you don't know.'"<sup>50</sup>

In one respect the *lex talionis* is enacted with the three necessary characters (the mother Mimi, the father of the unborn child, and Augie, the other man against whom a claim of restitution is made). Interestingly, though, it is not the father who makes the claim but the mother herself (the

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<sup>46</sup> Bellow, pp. 536, 575-76.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 673.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 674.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

claim being that her welfare is being disturbed by the pregnancy, not the property rights of the father). Mimi addresses the health and life of the mother principle obliquely when she deems the unborn child as a pursuer, not against her physical life, but her emotional health. She admonishes the “souls” to “stop haunting” her – evidence that she suffers or would suffer mentally from the aborted children pursuing her. Even the question “What do you think you ever were?” and the ending dependent clause “because you don’t know” imply that Mimi is aware of the strictly potential nature of the being she is addressing. Formation is evident when she depersonalizes the unborn child as a non-human entity (although the adjective “little” lessens the impact of the dehumanizing “scallop”). Finally, as rare to find in the fictional literature as it is in the *responsa* is Mimi’s recognition of the ensoulment issue. She even uses the word “souls” – not in any humanizing way, but as evidence that she fears retribution from the aborted. (Why the term is plural when she is contemplating aborting the current pregnancy may suggest that she has had previous abortions.)

Augie’s conversation with the reader does acknowledge the primacy of the mother’s choice in any abortion decision. “She let you know, but quick, that you, a man, could talk, but she was the one for whom it was the flesh and blood trouble” is followed by a more emphatic acknowledgment of the mother’s primacy: “The decision was really up to her,” he says, “whether to have a child by Frazer who wasn’t free to marry her now, even if she wanted to marry him.”<sup>51</sup> Augie accompanies her to the abortionist. Instead of saying that the abortionist thought that he was the father of the unborn child, Augie says of him that “Naturally he took me for the lover.”<sup>52</sup> This vocabulary confirms the abortionist’s perception that simultaneously removes not only the personhood of the unborn child (note that no mention of the unborn child is possible in syntax and vocabulary that focuses on Augie himself) but also the relationship that should be denoted by the word “father.” Thus, the fatherhood of the child is distanced as much as the unborn child’s humanity. This distance is repeated a few pages later, as though Bellow intended the discrepancy by reiterating it. When Augie escorts Mimi “to be led to the needle,” he

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 676.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 679.

reflects that they “held together like what we were not, a pair of lovers.”<sup>53</sup>

When the injection does not work, Mimi considers having herself declared insane or claiming that the pregnancy is a tubal one so that she can abort. When her plan to fool the hospital staff into thinking she has a tubal pregnancy fails (the staff learn that the child is safe in the womb), Augie helps her to obtain the hundred dollars for a surgical abortion with assistance from a childhood friend who feels trapped with a wife and child and whose view of marriage is more carnal than sacramental. Mimi’s abortion episode occupies fourteen more pages of text that tediously recount Mimi’s infection after the abortion, changes in Augie’s partying schedule, and Mimi’s eventual hospitalization. Ethical considerations of the abortion are not mentioned.

Curiously, the chapter ends with several “happy” experiences, as though the abortion episode is one that should not constitute the final note in the “adventures” (a positive connotation) of the novel’s hero. Augie’s mentally-challenged brother George, sequestered in an asylum since no family could take care of him at home, is happy to see him. Augie then visits his mother in her old-age home, a necessary episode since moving her from her apartment to the facility created intense conflict and anxiety between Augie and another brother, the more worldly Simon. Augie wants a place of his own and, after a wild youth, concludes that he wants to have children. Augie’s brother Simon impregnates his girlfriend, but there is a different approach now to the unborn child. Augie speaks almost affectionately, if not lovingly, of the “kid.”<sup>54</sup>

#### TRAJECTORY OF JEWISH FICTION ON ABORTION

Before the future trajectory of Jewish-American abortion fiction can be suggested, some speculation is necessary here. Perhaps Jewish fiction has not yet substantially addressed the life issues because doing so is much too close to the agonizing experience of the Holocaust, a proximity that, if engaged, would highlight more comparisons with than contrasts to the Nazi intellectual bases for the killing of millions. Life-affirming academics know the parallels well as emanating from a simple syllogism: once a

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 917.



human being has been deemed as less than human, no rights attach to that entity, and the entity can then be disposed of at will. Perhaps Jewish writers are unaware of such a parallel between those ancestors who lost their lives – first their legal personhood, and then their actual lives – in the Nazi era and the lives of the unborn who are exterminated either in an equally barbarous manner or with the most “enlightened” technology.

Perhaps Jewish writers are aware, but the intellectual vigor needed to draw the comparisons would create cognitive dissonance between the value for human life esteemed within Judaism for millennia (*l'hayyim* is not an empty phrase) and their own activism on behalf of abortion organizations. Of course, rational thought about the cognitive dissonance is trumped by the psychological effect. Before one realizes that one is a victim of such irrational thinking, one must be open emotionally to consider the possibility. Perhaps Jewish writers on abortion have not realized the cognitive dissonance of their anti-life positions because the emotional burden must first be overcome, and this they cannot do. Why the emotional burden cannot be divested may be easy to discover. The large number of Jewish activists in liberal and leftist causes is an item of common knowledge, and their activism in the anti-life movement has a long history, as Bernard Nathanson demonstrated in the course of several books documenting the founding of a premiere anti-life organization in the United States. Thus, the emotional bonding that has accrued over the past nearly fifty years is a burdensome load of two generations' worth of emotional baggage to discard.

Moreover, the Holocaust as a rhetorical trope in Jewish writing may be running its course – a natural consequence, since even the most horrendous historical events fade with the passage of time and people. Contemporary Americans can testify to the emotional blurring within the space of a decade of the September 11 attacks. While the images, often repeated on television and the web, especially around the anniversary of the terrorist attacks, still convey their emotional force (all can recall where they were exactly when the planes hit the towers), the political force of the attacks has lessened. Thus, Bush's policies on the War on Terror gave way to Obama's police action against terrorist criminals. Rappers are not the only ones now who question the previous administration's agenda, and the 2012 U.S. presidential elections will focus on economic concerns and the disastrous impact of Obamacare on the nation's resources much more

than on threatened terrorist activity.

Similarly, those who recall the Holocaust as an immediate and crucial event in their lives are dying. A second and third generation of writers reflect not so much on the events of the Holocaust but on its implications for their own lives, and most of these individuals are living safe and secure in the United States. One novel by Thane Rosenbaum is evidence that the emotional power of the Holocaust is passing for contemporary Jewish writers, and the title suggests the near triviality by which the Holocaust is being referenced. The novel concerns the main character's response to his being an unwanted child, but it is peppered with references to the Second World War, the Nazis, and the Holocaust. However, would Rosenbaum have been able to give his 1999 novel the shocking title *Second Hand Smoke*<sup>55</sup> if the power of the Holocaust was not waning?

Contemporary Jewish writers should consider new material and topics, if not to replace the emphasis on the Holocaust in the Jewish psyche, then at least to be concurrent with it. There are signs that such changes in subject matter may be occurring. Although Naomi Ragen's 1994 novel *The Sacrifice of Tamar*<sup>56</sup> mentions abortion frequently as a solution to a rape pregnancy, since the main character does not abort, the novel is more life-affirming than denying. For example, passages that explicitly mention but then discard the idea of the unborn child as a *rodef* run counter to items discussed here that automatically presume that the unborn child is an aggressive entity against his or her mother and must be destroyed. Erica Jong's *Inventing Memory: A Novel of Mothers and Daughters* (1997) initially concerns an infanticide during World War II but becomes a feminist celebration of American women, a recorded testament from one woman to another. Eva Mekler's *The Polish Woman* (2007), in which abortion is only casually mentioned, concerns an inheritance claim on the part of a woman remotely connected with a Jewish family and reads more as a detective novel than like a statement about the impact of the Holocaust on contemporary Jews.

Of course, the magnum opus for a Jewish-American writer could

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<sup>55</sup> Thane Rosenbaum, *Second Hand Smoke* (New York NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Naomi Ragen, *The Sacrifice of Tamar* (New York NY: Crown, 1994).

illustrate the connection between the holocausts that occurred in Europe and are occurring in North America. Others have logically drawn the parallels between the Nazi Holocaust and the American abortion movement in non-fiction works. While a more thorough analysis of the principles mentioned here needs to be conducted in a non-fiction work, a novel that openly incorporates the life-affirming principles and that compares the Holocaust during World War II with the American abortion holocaust of the past thirty-eight years would be a major accomplishment for a Jewish writer. One can only imagine how tortured, cathartic, and masterly such a literary work would be.