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For Love of Portnoy

Developing a Jewish identity in Philip Roth's America

By Daniel Taub

> It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—*I happen also to be a human being!*
>
> — Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*

In the United States we have struggled for our entire history with the integration of racial, ethnic and religious minorities—with who is allowed into American society and who is kept out, who looked down upon and who accepted, who forced to change and who allowed to retain their cultural identities. The impact of these struggles can be found in every aspect of American culture, from the politicians we elect to the food we eat, to the way we develop and redevelop our cities, to the music we listen to and the books we read. One reason Mark Twain is considered among the greatest American novelists is because of his sensitivity to the struggles of one minority group, African Americans, as portrayed in the 1884 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Less known is an essay he wrote 15 years later,

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"Concerning the Jews." "Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of," Twain declared,

> but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvellous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him.[1]

That fight may have come closest to being lost four decades later, when Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party attempted to annihilate the Jewish people in Europe. It would be difficult to overstate the impact the near-extermination of European Jews had on their American counterparts. In the U.S., by the time the Second World War began, the Jewish people were thriving—in business and art and the other areas cited by Twain—and suffered far less discrimination than African Americans and many other minorities. And the horrors of the Holocaust, once they became known, helped counter lingering anti-Semitism, bringing shame to those who dared discriminate against Jews. But the Holocaust also let Jews in America know that they were a hunted people—that they too may have been slaughtered had they or previous generations not immigrated to America before the war. A quotation from Philip Roth, another American satirist, serves as the epigraph to this essay, and the book it is drawn from, *Portnoy's Complaint*, will be my focus. I will use it to explore how the Holocaust affected the self-identity of American Jews in the mid-twentieth century, and how their children and grandchildren sought to rework that identity. Much of the essay is devoted to investigating the role Roth's novel played in the conflict between American Jews who criticized their culture and those who declared such criticism to be nothing more than internalized anti-Semitism. While I also will touch upon the topics of assimilation and self-hatred among other minorities in the U.S., including African Americans and Asians, the primary focus is on self-identity among American Jews and the unique impact genocide at the hands of the Nazis has had on it. The impetus for this discussion is a personal experience from my teenage years—an incident involving *Portnoy's Complaint*.

When I was 16, my mother and I went to visit my grandmother for the day. My mother had to assist her mother with paperwork related to my grandfather's recent death, and I expected to have little to do, so I brought along a paperback copy of Roth's book to read. The Jewish people are called the "People of the Book"—the book being the

Torah—and my grandparents lived up to the name. The walls of their home were lined with books, mostly Judaica, including multiple translations of the Torah. My grandfather, Arthur Hoffnung, not only was a reader of books but also wrote two of his own, *For Love of Torah: Laymen Explore the Bible* and *The University of Judaism at Forty—A Historical Memoir*. Reading was an important activity in the Hoffnung household, whether the books being read were Judaica or not. One of my earliest memories is of my grandmother reading to me Barbara Cohen's *The Carp in the Bathtub*, about two Jewish children who try to save their newly adopted pet from being turned into gefilte fish.

My grandmother was happy to share that Passover picture book with me when I was too young to read it on my own. More than a decade later, she was just as unhappy with the reading material I had chosen for myself. I could be reading a novel ideal for a Jewish teenager—a copy of *The Chosen*, autographed by Chaim Potok himself, was there for the taking—but instead I had chosen to read *Portnoy's Complaint*, of all things. My grandmother wanted to know why I had decided upon such an awful book.

Why was she so annoyed? At the time, I did not understand because I was only a few pages into the book and not yet aware of its subject matter. Furthermore, Roth's novel was published in 1969, four years before I was born, and I was thus unaware of the controversy that followed its appearance. So my grandmother's annoyance, at least initially, was lost on me. Her reaction did, however, make me want to read the book that much more—I was a teenager, after all—and it did not take me long to understand if not share her unhappiness. Not only was masturbation a theme throughout the book, but our people, the Jews, were not portrayed in anything close to the flattering, almost reverent light cast upon us by Potok or even *The Carp in the Bathtub*. This is how the novel's narrator, Alexander Portnoy, describes himself to his psychoanalyst:

> Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke—*only it ain't no joke!* Please, who crippled us like this? Who made us so morbid and hysterical and weak? Why, why are they screaming still, "Watch out! Don't do it! Alex—*no!*" and why, alone on my bed in New York, why am I still hopelessly beating my meat? Doctor, what do you call this sickness I have? Is this the Jewish suffering I used to hear so much about? Is this what has come down to me from the pogroms and the persecution? from the mockery and abuse bestowed by the *goyim* over these two thousand lovely years?[2]

This is a far cry from *The Chosen*, with its story of a friendship between two American

boys from different, though both Orthodox, Jewish traditions. Disagreements between the two traditions are a focus of the Potok novel. "In the lunchroom one day, one of the Hasidim accused a member of the Revisionist youth group of being worse than Hitler. Hitler had only succeeded in destroying the Jewish body, he shouted in Yiddish, but the Revisionists are trying to destroy the Jewish soul."[3] In Potok's world, a world also inhabited by my grandmother, Jews may disagree with one another—in fact, such disagreement is central to the Talmudic tradition—but that is very different from the criticism of American Jewish culture on the whole proffered by *Portnoy's Complaint*.

The above passages from *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Chosen* are offered as a pair because they both touch on an issue central to Jewish culture, on how my grandmother and others of her generation viewed their Jewish identity, and on how members of my generation—and, in particular, those for whom being Jewish is far more a secular culture than a practiced religion—have redefined that identity. The issue is anti-Semitism—the millennia of anti-Semitism to which Roth's Portnoy alludes and, more specifically, the near-destruction of European Jewry by Hitler, of which Potok's characters speak. For my grandmother, anti-Semitism was not an abstract issue, a problem from the past or something that happened elsewhere. In 1920, when she was 10 years old, she and her family fled Łódź, Poland, a place rife with anti-Semitism even two decades before the occupation of Poland by the Nazis. And as an adult my grandmother, like many Jews of her generation, believed anti-Semitism could arise at any time in America. In *World of Our Fathers*, published in 1976, Irving Howe writes that the American anti-Semitism of the 1920s and early '30s—the type practiced by Henry Ford and the radio broadcaster Father Coughlin—had largely dissipated after the Second World War, perhaps because of shame about the Holocaust. It was no longer acceptable in polite society to use the verb "to Jew" in reference to haggling, or to appear anti-Semitic in other public ways.[4] But, Howe wrote, anti-Semitism remained just beneath the surface, ready to reemerge should the circumstances prove amenable. This could be seen in the conflicts between Jews and African Americans in the 1960s and early '70s, both in Los Angeles and in the New York boroughs of the Bronx and Queens.[5] Some black militants found Jews who were active in the civil-rights movement to be patronizing, and wanted to expel them from their movement. There was a "fringe of blacks who pushed a legitimate need to be on their own into a repetition of coarse anti-

Semitic slogans," according to Howe. Despite such incidents, there were "younger Jews, brought up in a moment of relative tolerance, who grew impatient with the rooted fears of their parents" and with Jewish organizations "sounding the alarm against even the most trivial anti-Semitic incidents," Howe wrote. Nevertheless, the belief that "anti-Semitism, virulent or mild, was a constant in the Western world had settled deep into Jewish awareness."[6]

Gloria Anzaldúa, a scholar of Chicano culture and feminist and queer theory, wrote about the challenges faced by a person who is the product of multiple cultures, especially when those cultures include the oppressor and the oppressed. Two cultures may conflict with one another, comment on each other, criticize one another—and a person who comes from multiple cultures faces a challenge developing tolerance for and accepting those contradictions. "She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned," Anzaldúa wrote.[7] For my grandmother, as for Philip Roth's critics after he published *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth and like-minded Jews were not heroically developing a tolerance for ambiguity; rather, they were members of a people who had been oppressed, and they were welcoming the oppressor into their own consciousness. Even before the appearance of *Portnoy's Complaint*, from the time Roth began publishing in the 1950s, he was accused of being himself anti-Semitic, of Jewish "self-hatred" and of willful "betrayal" of his fellow Jews—of being someone who, through his "irreparable damage to the Jewish people," was doing as much harm as all organized anti-Semitic groups.[8] Howe, a leading Jewish social and literary critic, emerged as one of Roth's chief critics. In 1972, Howe wrote in *Commentary* that he and other reviewers, upon reading Roth's 1959 debut collection of short stories *Goodbye, Columbus*, found him "a gifted new writer" who was "working in the tradition of Jewish self-criticism and satire" that had been practiced by writers from Isaac Bashevis Singer in Yiddish to Saul Bellow in English. Howe continued:

> But now, from the vantage point of additional years, I think it clear that Roth, despite his concentration on Jewish settings and his acerbity of tone, has not really been involved in this tradition. For he is one of the first American-Jewish writers who finds that it yields him no sustenance, no norms or values from which to launch his attacks on middle-class complacence.[9]

Furthermore, Howe wrote, Roth also failed to find sustenance in other cultures or traditions,

such as mainstream American culture, to which Roth had a "decidedly meager" connection. Howe's attack "gnawed" at Roth for years and he would later, "with barely concealed rage," transform Howe into the insufferable critic Milton Appel in the 1983 novel *The Anatomy Lesson.*[10]

Roth, it seems, had placed himself in the middle of a debate that my grandmother and I, within the confines of her home, joined when she saw my copy of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Was what Roth was doing by writing the novel—and I, by reading it—"good for the Jews?" This is a phrase that I and other American Jews of both my own and previous generations were quite familiar with. Roth himself used the expression in another of his novels, the 1974 *My Life as a Man*. For my grandmother, who witnessed terrible anti-Semitism firsthand—hatred terrible enough for her family to flee their homeland for a country whose language they did not yet speak—whether something was "good for the Jews" was worthy of serious concern. Had she stayed in Poland, she surely would have been sent to one of Hitler's labor or death camps—had she not died of disease or starvation or simply been shot dead, that is. Why then, would we voluntarily do the anti-Semites' work for them by producing and embracing such works as *Portnoy's Complaint*?

I did not, and do not, share my grandmother's view of the book. At 16, I thought Roth's irreverence hilarious, and upon rereading the novel two decades later, I found that it remains a sharp satire of a particular period in American Jewish life—and this notwithstanding Howe's assessment that the "cruelest thing anyone can do with *Portnoy's Complaint* is to read it twice."[11]

Why was, and is, my opinion of *Portnoy's Complaint* and the representation of Jewish culture it offers so different from that of my grandmother, Howe and Roth's other critics? I attribute the chasm to our vastly different views of anti-Semitism. For my grandmother, Howe and others whose lives spanned much of the twentieth century, the Holocaust (along with less deadly yet still terrible forms of anti-Semitism) may not have *completely* determined how they viewed what it means to be Jewish, but it certainly helped shape their Jewish identities in a significant way. That was far less the case for me and others born closer to the end of the twentieth century. By the time I was a teenager and reading Roth, America seemed to be a place largely free of overt, and even covert, discrimination against Jews, at least in such large cities as Los Angeles and New York, with their sizeable

and relatively affluent Jewish populations—populations that included individuals in positions of power and prominence in the realms of business, politics and the media. My own grandfather, in his book *For Love of Torah*, wrote that discrimination was no longer a serious problem for Jews in the U.S. Anti-Semitism had "made for Jewish solidarity in the past" because of our common "interest in Jewish survival," he argued. "But, in America, life has been good to us, and the inconveniences we have suffered are being handled by secular Jewish defense agencies in an efficient and professional manner."[12] Any lingering manifestations of American anti-Semitism were little more than "inconveniences"—and hardly as discriminatory or violent as the anti-Semitism that had caused his future wife, my grandmother, to flee Poland a half century earlier.

In the time and place in which I was living at the age of 16, anti-Semitism was certainly a devastating part of my people's history, but it was no longer the visceral, daily reality it once was for my grandmother. That brings me back to *Portnoy's Complaint*. For my grandmother, and for others who believed that the book was not "good for the Jews," Roth had adopted a viewpoint so critical of Jewish culture that he had become, perhaps, an anti-Semite himself.[*] After all, for them, anti-Semitism had hardly been eradicated and was rather, always, just around the corner. For any Jew of prominence, as Roth surely was, to write a book so unreservedly critical of his own people was surely to invite a reemergence of the type of rabid anti-Semitism constantly simmering just below the surface. In fact, Gershom Scholem, a distinguished Jewish scholar, said just that of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Writing in Hebrew in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz,* he called the novel "revolting" and worse than the notorious forgery *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, because it gave anti-Semites "authentic evidence" of Jewish treachery. "This is the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying. I daresay that with the next turn of history, not long to be delayed, this book will make all of us defendants at court," Scholem warned.[13]

I, however, did not fear the next turn of history, that day of reckoning—or at least not anywhere close to the extent Scholem and perhaps my grandmother did. I had the luxury of living in a time and place largely free of anti-Semitism, and with that luxury came freedom to be critical of my culture in the way Alexander Portnoy was, if not in the same exaggerated manner. I doubt I could have articulated this at the age of 16, but it seems now that the

[*] Howe, for his part, did not agree with the critics who charged Roth with writing an anti-Semitic book, though *Portnoy's Complaint*, Howe wrote, "contains plenty of contempt for Jewish life." (Howe, "Philip Roth," 76.)

freedom to depict Jewish culture in the way Roth did in *Portnoy's Complaint* is itself a blow against anti-Semitism. It is a way of saying that we Jews have been so successful in combating anti-Semitism that we are confident that the kind of discrimination we suffered in the past will never again rear its ugly head—or, if it does, we will be able to again strike it down. And thus we now have the freedom to portray ourselves in the most critical ways possible.

There is something else going on here, too, though. Many American Jews of my grandparents' generation—those who grew up in religious households and continued to attend synagogue services and observe Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover and the other holidays and festivals into adulthood—treated Judaism as a religion that is actively practiced. Unlike for many secular Jews of my generation, for these older, religious Jews being Jewish did not involve merely belonging to a people with a shared culture and history. Their Judaism was moored to the texts—the Torah, the Talmud and the siddur used at weekly Shabbat services—with Jewish culture being an adjunct to or outgrowth of the religion itself. Attacks on Jewish culture, then, could be viewed as an attack on the religion itself—on the 613 commandments in the Torah, on the beliefs and ideals central to Judaism for thousands of years. And even if members of my grandmother's generation concluded that Roth was not attacking the religion itself, he and other "self-hating Jews" could be seen as giving in to something almost as offensive: assimilation.

In the U.S., assimilation is a complex, multilayered issue—for Jews, and for other minority groups. The notion of America as a melting pot, a place where immigrants give up their individual ethnic identities to ultimately become much like everyone else in the country, is now long dead, and even the metaphor that replaced it, America as a mixed salad, seems somewhat quaint.[14] Labeling the U.S. as a nation of cultural pluralism, which many now do, does little to capture the myriad ways immigrants and other members of minority groups both assimilate and retain the traits of their individual cultures. Some people put on one face when interacting with people outside their ethnic group and another when at home or with people of the same background. Some live in neighborhoods of immigrants like them without venturing outside the language, food, religion and dress of their nation of origin—but push their children to join what they see as the mainstream culture. Still other members of minority groups, those whose parents had largely assimilated, seek to recapture aspects of

their cultures they believe have been lost.* And all of this is to say nothing of those who are the offspring of more than one minority group, and the efforts they put into juggling, balancing and integrating their multiple cultures.

Such nuances are largely missing, however, from the writings of psychologists, social scientists, philosophers and other thinkers who began looking at Jewish assimilation in America in the years of and immediately following the Second World War. They were instead focused on comparing assimilation in the U.S. with assimilation in Germany, where some Jews had changed their names, converted to Christianity and denied their Jewish heritage—attempts to fit in that nevertheless did nothing to prevent the Nazis' near-annihilation of European Jews, including those who attempted to hide their Jewish ties. For some of these writers, assimilation and self-hatred were seen as closely related. Social psychologist Kurt Lewin was one of the leading thinkers and writers on the issue during and soon after the war, with his *Contemporary Jewish Record* essay "Self-Hatred Among Jews," from 1941, being frequently cited.[15] In the essay, Lewin wrote:

> Speaking in terms of individuals rather than groups, the self-hatred of a Jew may be directed against the Jews as a group, against a particular fraction of the Jews, against his own family, or against himself. It may be directed against Jewish institutions, Jewish mannerisms, Jewish language, or Jewish ideals. There is an almost endless variety of forms which Jewish self-hatred may take. Most of them, and the most dangerous forms, are a kind of indirect, under-cover self-hatred.[16]

Lewin's essay was followed by similar ideas put forth by intellectuals with Jewish ties such as the German political philosopher Hannah Arendt and French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.[17] Sartre wrote in 1948 that the "inauthentic Jew," as he called someone who denies or tries to escape being Jewish, "has allowed himself to be persuaded by the anti-Semites."[18] It should be noted here that it is not only Jews, of course, who have been charged with inauthenticity or self-loathing. Lewin, in his 1941 essay, wrote that "Jewish self-hatred is a phenomenon which has its parallel in many underprivileged groups," with one of most extreme cases existing among African Americans. Lewin, using the terminology of his time, wrote, "Negroes distinguish within their group four or five strata according to skin shade—the lighter the skin the higher the strata. This discrimination among themselves goes so far that a girl with a light skin may refuse to marry a man with a darker skin."[19] Similar instances

* Among Jews, this can be seen in efforts to keep the Yiddish language alive, such as the work being done by the Los Angeles organization Yiddishkayt.

of what Lewin would have labeled self-hatred, and Sartre inauthenticity, arguably can be found among many of today's American minorities. Americans of Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese and Filipino descent who have written about their experiences growing up in the U.S. speak of being ashamed of their parents' inability to speak English well, not wanting to bring home non-Asian friends because of the food smells and decorations to be found there, and avoiding socializing with other Asians at school because of a desire to fit in with the white majority instead. "Despite their parents' best efforts," write Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, summarizing a collection of narratives by Asian American professionals, "most resisted learning their native language and culture, especially during adolescence. Their resistance stemmed for the pressure to be "normal" and to fit in among their predominately white peers."[20] Amita Vasudeva, writing of growing up as an Indian American, echoes the sentiment.

> When my teachers asked me how my "turkey day" was, I was too ashamed to tell them that I ate cholay/bhatura—not cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes. I pretended I got tons of Christmas gifts even though my parents only gave us a few token presents. When my mom spoke Hindi to me in the grocery store, I hated it; I froze, tense with embarrassment and pretended not to hear. I would always look around nervously and then, down because I knew people were looking and I was afraid of their gaze.[21]

As for Jewish Americans, thinkers on the issue of self-loathing who came along after the publication of Lewin and Sartre's writings on the topic, often offered more nuanced portraits of assimilation. For example, sociologist David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, published in 1950, placed Jews' conformity and so-called self-hatred within the context of larger social forces at work in the U.S., including a growing tolerance for cultural pluralism that did not previously exist in this country.[22]

By the time I was growing up, America seemed to have indeed become culturally pluralistic, especially in large gateway cities such as Los Angeles, where I was raised. That is certainly not to say America was or is free of ethnic strife—even if I had wanted to believe that, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 would have proven me wrong. But there was no longer a feeling that one had to choose between one's ethnic group and mainstream culture. During my adolescence, I felt able to both identify myself culturally as a Jew and have friends from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds. This embrace of cultural pluralism (a term I certainly did not know at the time) gave me the freedom to be critical of aspects of Jewish culture without feeling I had succumbed to self-hatred or internalized anti-Semitism. Even if

Alexander Portnoy's complaints were heavily exaggerated for comic effect, they resonated with me. I too felt that American Jewish culture had unnecessarily instilled in many of its members tendencies toward neurosis, fear and self-doubt. I thus felt sympathy for Portnoy when he lamented:

> And instead of crying over he-who refuses at the age of fourteen ever to set foot inside a synagogue again, instead of wailing for he-who has turned his back on the saga of *his people*, weep for your own pathetic selves, why don't you, sucking and sucking on that sour grape of a religion! Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—*I happen also to be a human being!*[23]

This passage from the novel calls for some discussion. First, one lingering question I have so far held off addressing is whether Portnoy's lamentations about the Jewish people and their saga are also Roth's—whether the complaints of the character and the author are one and the same. And does it matter if they are? For Howe, there seemed to be little separation between Philip Roth and Alexander Portnoy, with the latter's beliefs being at least to some extent Roth's as well. Howe wrote:

> The psychic afflictions of his character Roth would surely want to pass up, but who can doubt that Portnoy's cry from the heart—enough of Jewish guilt, enough of the burdens of history, enough of inhibition and repression, it is time to "let go" and soar to the horizons of pleasure—speaks in some sense for Roth?[24]

Ultimately I do not believe it is important whether Portnoy is a version of Roth. It was Portnoy, after all, who I and many other Jewish readers felt a connection to, and it was he who articulated many of the feelings we had about our culture. The author—Roth himself—is somewhat beside the point, in the same way J.D. Salinger is less important than Holden Caulfield to the disaffected teenager reading *The Catcher in the Rye* for the first time. While an assumption may be made that Portnoy is indeed an outlet for Roth's feelings and concerns (an assumption that Howe made), it is the feelings and concerns themselves that resonate—or fail to resonate—with the reader. For the purposes of this discussion, the emotions and ideas expressed by the fictional Portnoy are more important than Roth's own beliefs.

Secondly, what exactly does Portnoy mean when he talks of also being a human being? Are human beings not, after all, discriminatory, cruel, even murderous at times—the

cause of suffering in others? Exactly the kind of suffering that has caused Jews to become, in Portnoy's opinion, so pathetic? I do not believe Portnoy means to align himself with all the traits human beings possess, either on the positive side of the ledger or the negative side. Rather I believe that Portnoy, tired of his culture and the flaws he sees in it, is trying to establish himself as part of a community larger than the Jewish community—and, in his hyperbolic manner, he is going beyond just the people of the city in which he lives, or even all of America, and instead declaring himself part of the entirety of humanity. This, arguably, is assimilation taken about as far as it can go—and perhaps the ultimate form of Jewish self-hatred, at least in Lewin and Sartre's view.

One striking aspect of the above passage from *Portnoy's Complaint* is the line that immediately follows it: "But you *are* a Jew, my sister says. You are a Jewish boy, more than you know, and all you're doing is making yourself miserable, all you're doing is hollering into the wind." Hannah, Alexander Portnoy's 18-year-old sister, goes on to note that had he been born in Europe rather than the U.S., he would be dead. "Gassed, or shot, or incinerated, or butchered, or buried alive," she tells her 14-year-old brother. "Do you know that? And you could have screamed all you wanted that you were not a Jew, that you were a human being and had nothing whatever to do with their stupid suffering heritage, and still you would have been taken away to be disposed of."[25]

This is an important point because it speaks to an issue not focused upon by Lewin and Sartre: complete assimilation is, in fact, rarely possible because other people will inevitably remind you of who you are. As Hannah Portnoy notes, the Nazis did not care whether someone self-identified as a Jew, or felt a connection to the heritage, or wanted to be a part of the Jewish people. None of these things made someone a Jew in the eyes of the Nazis. For them, anyone descended from Jews, and therefore lacking the blood purity Hitler felt was possessed by the Aryan race, was deemed a Jew. And the same is true for almost every member of almost every minority group everywhere. It does not matter, for example, if an Asian American or Indian American was born and grew up in the U.S., surrounds herself only with white people, never learned any language but English or eats a variety of cuisines. There still will be someone, inevitably, asking her, "Where are you from?" or "What do you eat at home?" or "When are you going home?"—someone to remind her that she is a member of a minority group.[26]

Returning to and concluding with a brief discussion of anti-Semitism in Europe, and specifically the Nazis' attempted extermination of the Jews, is appropriate because it is behind much of the Jewish people's suffering from which Alexander Portnoy wants to escape. It is also the type of hatred that I believe is almost absent today in much of the U.S., with its absence not only giving American Jews the freedom to be as self-critical as Portnoy, but also allowing me to develop a different type of Jewish self-identity than my grandmother had.

I am hardly the first person, of course, to feel relatively safe and comfortable as a Jew. "I personally must confess that neither in school nor at the University, nor in the world of literature, have I ever experienced the slightest suppression or indignity as a Jew," wrote Stefan Zweig about his life in *fin de siècle* Vienna.[27] "The World of Security" is what he called that time and place in his autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*, published in English in 1943—the year after he committed suicide while living in Brazil, the country to which he fled during the Second World War. The period he described was a charmed though short-lived one for Jewish people:

> "Live and let live" was the famous Viennese motto, which today still seems to me to be more humane than all the categorical imperatives, and it maintained itself throughout all classes. Rich and poor, Czechs and Germans, Jews and Christians, lived peaceably together in spite of occasional chafing, and even the political and social movements were free of the terrible hatred which has penetrated the arteries of our time as a poisonous residue of the First World War.[28]

The sense of security Zweig's parents and other Viennese Jews felt, he wrote, was in part the result of ignoring the danger signs to be found outside their country. "They passed over all reports of war in the newspapers just as they did the sporting page. And truly, what did it matter to them what took place outside of Austria, what did it change in their lives?"[29]

I juxtapose Austria at the end of the nineteenth century and the U.S. at the beginning of the twenty-first as examples of times when and places where the Jewish people have felt safe—safe because anti-Semitism seemed no longer to be a threat. In Austria, that safety was an illusion. An argument can be made that Jews in the U.S. today arrive at a feeling of safety by ignoring or giving little importance to the news from overseas—from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust to the widespread belief in the Middle East that Jews who worked at the World Trade Center were warned to stay home on September 11, 2001, implying a Jewish conspiracy behind the day's terrorist attacks. These

serve as reminders that, as far as we have come in combating anti-Semitism—and despite Twain's optimistic belief that "all things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains"—hatred towards Jews remains a lingering threat, ever ready to resurface, just as my grandmother and others of her generation feared.[30]

This is not to say, however, that I and other Jews, for fear of aligning ourselves with anti-Semites, should bar ourselves from being self-critical, from viewing ourselves with a satirical or ironical eye. Our right to do this is as much a part of our culture, at this point, as the Talmud or any other Judaic text. Even as we criticize ourselves, we still, of course, remain Jews—and should we ever forget that, the world will remind us who we are. We will never, as Portnoy fantasizes, be able to recreate ourselves as simply human beings. "Who, born a Jew in the twentieth century, has been so lofty in spirit never to have shared this fantasy?" Howe asked. "But who, born a Jew in the twentieth century, has been so foolish in mind as to dally with it for more than a moment?"[31]

Endnotes

[1] Mark Twain, "Concerning the Jews," 535.

[2] Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 36-37.

[3] Chaim Potok, *The Chosen*, 227.

[4] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 630.

[5] *Ibid.*, 632-633; Max Vorspan and Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 284.

[6] Howe, *World*, 631-633.

[7] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 78-79.

[8] Susan A. Glenn, "The Vogue of Jewish Self-Hatred," 95.

[9] Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," 73.

[10] David Remnick, "Profiles: Into the Clear," 85.

[11] Howe, "Philip Roth," 74

[12] Arthur Hoffnung, "Ki Tetze." In Hoffnung, ed., *For Love of Torah*, 352.

[13] Remnick, "Profiles," 85.

[14] Piotr M. Szpunar, "Neither 'Non-' Nor 'Becoming'," 369-370.

[15] Glenn, "Vogue," 102-103.

[16] Kurt Lewin, "Self-Hatred Among Jews (1941)," 133.

[17] Glenn, "Vogue," 105.

[18] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Portrait of the Inauthentic Jew," 389-90.

[19] Lewin, "Self-Hatred," 135.

[20] Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, eds., *Struggle for Ethnic Identity*, 213.

[21] Amita Vasudeva, "Journal Entry," in Women of the South Asian Descent Collective, eds. *Our Feet Walk the Sky*, 132.

[22] Glenn, "Vogue," 115.

[23] Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint,* 76.

[24] Howe, "Philip Roth," 75.

[25] Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 76-77.

[26] Ruth Chung, "Reflections on a Korean American Journey," in Min and Kim, *Struggle for Ethnic Identity*, 60; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America," in Women of the South Asian Descent Collective, eds., *Our Feet Walk the Sky*, 352.

[27] Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 25.

[28] Ibid., 24.

[29] Ibid., 26.

[30] Twain, "Concerning the Jews," 535.

[31] Howe, "Philip Roth," 76.

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