Bernard Malamud at the Edge of Ethnic Humor

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The first draft (1973) of Bernard Malamud's *Dubin's Lives* (1979) opens with the protagonist, William Dubin, encountering a man by the name of Malamud.[1] "They sometimes met on country roads when there were flowers or snow," the August 1973 draft begins; "Dubin had his circular route" while "Malamud wandered along various roads." On these "snowy, windswept fields" the two share a joke: "'Did you hear the one about the two Jewish gentlemen in Central Park?' Malamud [Dubin] asked. 'One picked a flower and asked the first other, 'What's this?' The other answered, 'How should I know, am I a milliner?'" (First Draft of *Dubin's Lives*). The opening of this draft closely follows the novel as it was eventually published, albeit with several key differences. The "Malamud" character of the first draft, a writer of fiction, becomes "Greenfield" by the second. While the published novel likewise begins with a joke, Malamud ultimately opted for a different comic standard: "Had [Dubin] heard the one about the rabbi who, when his sexton prayed aloud, 'Dear God, I am nothing, You are everything,' remarked, 'Look who says he's nothing!'" (*Dubin* 7). This joke is well-known—a version of it even appears in Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish* (1968) under the entry for "*k'nocker*" (boastful person) (188-89).

While the second joke may be funnier, the first is likely more apposite to the novel, poking fun as it does at the supposed distance that these diaspora Jews have from the natural world. In place of an appreciation of beauty, the two men are only able to draw on the language of commerce—flowers are part of the milliner's trade and are valued for their ability to adorn hats. In the context of Dubin and Malamud meeting on their country walks in frozen Vermont winters, the joke also wryly highlights the unlikeliness of these "two Jewish gentlemen" living out their lives in this landscape. What has taken them from the city to rural Vermont? What took the two men of the joke across the world to Central Park?

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How can we account for the unlikeliness of these twentieth-century Jewish lives in general?

Jokes were central to Malamud's fiction—they were more than just adornment, so to speak. Malamud's biographer, Philip Davis, describes how in the 1930s the aspiring writer funded his university studies at City College partly by working as a waiter in resorts in the Catskills Mountains during university breaks. By "the summer of 1935," Davis reports, "Malamud was writing and acting in skits and stand-up comedy routines" (44). There are lists of jokes and witticisms in Malamud's personal archive from after this period, including one that was almost certainly copied from the final pages of Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg's *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1954): "God loves the poor and helps the rich"; "Sleep faster, we need the pillows"; "a blind horse makes straight for the pit" (Malamud, Undated Typescript). Malamud recalls that he encountered Immanuel Olsvanger's *Röyte Pomerantsen: Jewish Folk Humor Gathered and Edited* (1947) around the time that he was invited to "translate a story from the Yiddish" for Howe and Greenberg's anthology.[2] Malamud says that he read in the volume "six marriage anecdotes—two of which were very important" for his story in progress, "The Magic Barrel" (1954) (*Talking* 80). Archival papers also show that he recommended to his students at Bennington in 1961 that they read Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), a work that contains a number of Jewish joke standards (Teaching Material).

There are stories of Malamud's, as Philip Roth writes, "where the joke seemed only an inch away from the art, where the charm of the art was how it humorously hovered at the edge of the joke" (122-23). What does this hovering, as Roth puts it, allow Malamud's fiction to achieve? I explore how Malamud's engagement with Jewish dialect materials is central to his circumspect, wry, and often deforming literary explorations of the very topic that is most associated with his work—Jewish American identity—and related issues such as self-understanding and belief. This might appear to be an unusual proposition, as Malamud draws on Jewish jokes to deflect emerging narratives about Jewishness. Yet I suggest that his use of these materials is distinctive and inventive, as he engages in a kind of aesthetic play with jokes—joking with them, in a sense, elaborating their thinking—and in the process deepening their seriousness. There is a significant distance from Malamud's stories to the jokes he found in the likes of *Röyte Pomerantsen* or wrote in the Catskills, of course, but I show how Malamud fictionalizes Jewish joke traditions in ways that both significantly expand and complicate their internal logic.

I focus on two stories from the 1950s and address how Jewish jokes structure their tone and thought. "The Lady of the Lake" (1958) follows a shop worker named Harry Levin on his trip to Lago Maggiore in northern Italy as he takes the name "Freeman" and attempts to live out a fantasy of not being Jewish. By the story's end, he is left grasping after his failed love precisely because of the

history he has sought to deny. In "Angel Levine" (1955), Malamud depicts a world caught between the everyday trials of the lives of its immigrant characters and one in which the spiritual realm might interrupt at any moment. Manischevitz, a tailor, addresses a Black angel recently arrived from Harlem who has responded in his hour of need: "The tailor could not rid himself of the feeling that he was the butt of a jokester. Is this what a Jewish angel looks like? he asked himself. This I am not convinced" (160). The story concludes with Levine seeming to have borne himself aloft after having healed Manischevitz's wife and restored the husband's faith (166). Both stories were written in a period in which Malamud was searching for new ways to expand his fiction, moving away from what he would later describe as the "short, realistic pieces I had been writing for a while." It was in this spirit that he instructed himself in his notebook in March 1953: "Go back to the poetic, evocative, singing—often symbolic short story. Use all you've got. Go for more than story—but make the story good" (*Talking* 80).[3]

Specific to Malamud's development of jokes in these stories is an attention to how their ironies can be turned toward certain kinds of insight. I am not arguing that jokes do any determinate work—quite the opposite, in fact—but rather that Malamud finds in the structure of specific joke-telling traditions the capability to explore lines of thought that might otherwise be unavailable. Todd McGowan writes that the ambivalent intimacy of comedy is integral to its effects: "too much distance ruins comedy as much as too much proximity does" (17). Jokes help Malamud create spaces of strange relation, particularly across the uncertain boundaries of identification, belief, and ethics. It is precisely when Malamud's schlemiels are at their most confident that they are at their most deluded and ethically incapable.[4] Apprehending jokes in his fiction is a matter of "understanding what occurs during the comic event and what comedy allows us to see that we otherwise wouldn't see," as McGowan writes of comedy generally. The outcome is a kind of "comic insight"—forms of knowledge which can only be accessed through close attention to the fiction itself (12). In the venturesome spaces that jokes help Malamud to develop, the pleasure and intelligence of his best writing emerges.

Academic readings of Jewish American humor have long tended to use community joke-telling traditions to understand the history and experience of Jews in the United States.[5] As we shall see, this line of thought even returns to the period in which Malamud was writing. However, I follow in the wake of recent critical works in American Jewish studies that query assumptions about how the literary tradition I explore contributes to identity. As Benjamin Schreier describes it, the historiographic (as opposed to historical) emergence of the field of Jewish American literature centers on the 1950s, when there was an "irruption . . . of Jewish American writers like Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Grace Paley into the heart of the American cultural scene" (1). This historiography has in turn been linked to the wider

historical circumstances: just as Jewish American literature became mainstream in American literary culture, Jews moved from the margin to the center of American life. In Schreier's account, there is a circularity to all this, and Jewish American literature as a formation has been taken to reflect the history of Jews in the United States—a move that ultimately provides its "own literary historical warrant" (3). I hence turn against the rather literal tendency to see "literary texts written by Jews in America" as "representatives of Jewish American people, experience, and culture" (Schreier 4).

Instead, I will show how Bernard Malamud draws on joke-telling traditions to create fictions that often disturb narratives of Jewish American identity and self-understanding. If the difference I am describing seems a fine one, it is ultimately the distinction between, on the one hand, seeing jokes as mere reflections of culture and history and, on the other, understanding jokes as materials that, when subjected to Malamud's creative imagination, allow him to survey challenging and deforming thoughts. His writing necessarily draws on Jewish American cultural materials from the period, but not to simply represent a community or its political wishes. Rather, jokes prise open for Malamud the capability to explore seemingly intractable problems, ones that indeed feel just as freighted today. How might American Jews, he wonders, be perversely attached to victim identity? What truly connects Jewish Americans with European Jews? Is there anything inherent to Jewishness? And how might newfound Jewish whiteness inflect relations with African Americans in the United States? Malamud's comic thinking enriches his often ambivalent responses to these questions, as he develops stories that continue to speak to some of the most difficult issues of his period and ours.

"You Don't Look Jewish"

"The Lady of the Lake," the only previously unpublished story in *The Magic Barrel* (1958), dramatizes the issue of recognizing others, and being recognized oneself, as Jewish. In Malamud's earliest conception of the story, recorded in an October 1950 entry in his composition notebook, he wondered if there could be a "Jewish student or teacher who meets a (former German refugee) girl who is hiding her Jewishness." In this scenario, "the situation makes them both unhappy and they part." There are no extant drafts of the story, either from this period or later. His notebook in fact suggests that he only returned to it again more than three years afterward, in January 1954, when he refigured the story as "boy and girl meet somewhere—perhaps in college." The woman is still "apparently gentile," but the man, thinking that she is a gentile, does not tell her that he is Jewish. Over time, he comes to believe that she believes he is Jewish, which he understands as a fault in her eyes (and credits to anti-Semitism). He eventually

tells her the truth about himself, but this "doesn't make her happy—and she is still elusive." In this sketch of the story, the woman's elusiveness is not for the reason he thinks—her prejudice as a gentile against Jews—but rather, as she tells him the next time she sees him, because she suffered in Germany due to "her Jewishness" and now "no longer has a desire to be known as a Jew" (Story Ideas—Oregon).

The story as it was eventually published follows the January 1954 notebook entry in a number of its key elements, even if its conclusion is reversed. The story focuses on Harry Levin, a man who does not reveal that he is Jewish to a potential lover. Malamud would eventually decide not to make Levin a student or teacher but rather "an ambitious, handsome" thirty-year-old man "who walked the floors in Macy's book department." Levin has "recently come into a small inheritance," left his job, and gone abroad to "see[k] romance." While in Paris, he changes his name to "Henry R. Freeman," a decision that is "for no reason he was sure of, except that he was tired of the past—tired of the limitations it had imposed upon him" ("Lady" 221). The secluded setting that Malamud initially imagined as a college campus eventually became an island in Lago Maggiore, near Stresa, Italy. It is on this island that Freeman encounters Isabella, the woman with whom he will develop his complex web of understandings and misunderstandings.

The story focuses on a series of encounters between Freeman and Isabella, over the course of which Freeman three times denies that he is Jewish. Each of these can be understood as a setup, almost as if for a joke, which in turn intensifies the surprise of the story's conclusion. The first denial emerges in their initial conversation on the island:

> "Are you an American?" she inquired, her Italian accent pleasantly touched with an English one.
>
> "That's right."
>
> The girl studied him for a full minute, and then hesitantly asked, 'Are you, perhaps, Jewish?" (227)

This exchange upsets Freeman, our newly non-Jewish protagonist, as he suddenly finds himself less free from his past and its limitations than he wished to be: "Freeman suppressed a groan. Though secretly shocked by the question, it was not, in a way, unexpected. Yet he did not look Jewish, could pass as not—had. So without batting an eyelash, he said, no, he wasn't. And a moment later added, though he personally had nothing against them" (227). Freeman, living his new life, rejects the claims of history on him, as he experiments with the role of a liberal and even-tempered American gentile in postwar Europe, quickly clarifying that he has "nothing against" these Jews. The meeting is cut short as Freeman is discovered by the tour guide and shooed back to the group (227).

Freeman denies his identity for a second time as the pair take a trip to Mt. Mottarone. This denial is more indirect, but it nonetheless disturbs their developing romance:

> "Isabella—" Freeman turned to ask her to marry him; but she was standing apart from him, her face pale.
>
> Pointing to the snowy mountains, her hand moving in a gentle arc, she asked, "Don't those peaks—those seven—look like a menorah?"
>
> "Like a what?" Freeman politely inquired. He had a sudden frightening remembrance of her seeing him naked as he came out of the lake and felt constrained to tell her that circumcision was de rigueur in stateside hospitals; but he didn't dare. She may not have noticed.
>
> "Like a seven-branched candelabrum holding white candles in the sky?" Isabella asked.
>
> "Something like that."
>
> "Or do you see the Virgin's crown adorned with jewels?"
>
> "Maybe the crown," he faltered. "It all depends how you look at it." (237)

In Malamud's developing fantasy of life as an American gentile, he decides that Freeman would be ignorant of the fundamentals of Jewish life even as he is returned to the circumcision that might give the lie to his new identity. Freeman's performance is unconvincing; not only does he falter, but his conclusion—"it all depends how you look at it"—sounds more than a little shabby.

The story concludes with Freeman's third denial. Schlemiel that he is, he does not pick up why Isabella might be particularly interested in the question of his Jewishness ("I'm not hiding anything," he tells her several pages earlier. "That's what I was afraid of," she replies [238]). She says goodbye to him in the sculpture garden where they first met:

> "To whom goodbye?" Freeman affectionately mocked. "I have come to marry you."
>
> She gazed at him with eyes moistly bright, then came the soft, inevitable thunder: "Are you a Jew?"
>
> Why should I lie? he thought; she's mine for the asking. But then he trembled with the fear of at the last moment losing her, so Freeman answered, though his scalp prickled, "How many no's make never? Why do you persist with such foolish questions?" (240)

Freeman is unprepared for what she finally shows him. Where Malamud had initially imagined that Isabella might wish to give up her Jewishness due to her experience in Europe, she turns out to be more attached to her identity precisely because of this suffering. This renders the gentile Freeman an unsuitable partner:

> "Because I hoped you were." Slowly she unbuttoned her bodice, arousing Freeman, though he was thoroughly confused as to her intent. When she revealed her

> breasts—he could have wept at their beauty (now recalling a former invitation to gaze at them, but he had arrived too late on the raft)—to his horror he discerned tattooed on the soft and tender flesh a bluish line of distorted numbers.
>
> "Buchenwald," Isabella said, "when I was a little girl. The Fascists sent us there. The Nazis did it."
>
> Freeman groaned, incensed at the cruelty, stunned by the desecration.
>
> "I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for." (240)

Unable to correct his misrepresentations, Freeman watches Isabella slip away one last time, leaving him alone to hug the statues of the sculpture garden.

Through Isabella's declaration and Freeman's secret, "The Lady of the Lake" draws on the long-standing tradition of Jewish joke-telling that explores recognizing and misrecognizing someone as Jewish. Freud cites an example from this tradition:

> A Galician Jew was travelling on a train. He had made himself really comfortable, had unbuttoned his coat and put his feet up on the seat. Just then a gentleman in modern dress entered the compartment. The Jew promptly pulled himself together and took up a proper pose. The stranger fingered through the pages of a notebook, made some calculations, reflected for a moment and then suddenly asked the Jew: "Excuse me, when is Yom Kippur . . . ?"
>
> "Oho!" said the Jew, and put his feet up on the seat again before answering. (80-81)

Freud explains that this joke focuses on the "democratic mode of thinking of Jews, which recognizes no distinction between lords and serfs, but also, alas, upsets discipline and co-operation" (112). For our purposes, though, it is especially significant that the joke relies on the distinction between the Galician Jew and the "gentleman in modern dress": the former's initial misrecognition of the latter makes the joke possible—ethnic markers alone are not enough.

This style of joke was well-known among Jewish Americans in the period in which Malamud was writing. In spring 1958, Bernard Rosenberg and Gilbert Shapiro published "Marginality and Jewish Humor" in the magazine *Midstream*.[6] This article makes a familiar argument, linking ethnic identity to comic defensiveness. Jewish humor, they find, emerges out of the experience of marginalization and, in its American version, responds to problems of identification—the very issues Freeman confronts. As they write: "The questions 'Who am I?' and 'What am I?' are rendered almost unendurable for the contemporary American Jew. He translates and refracts them in his jokes" (263). From here, they offer an account of different genres of joke-telling among Jews in America, reflecting on how jokes variously respond to the breakup of shtetl life, describe difference, and give voice to collective experience. They conclude that the joke ultimately brings American Jews together: "[T]he Jewish joke acts today as a

universal solvent among American Jews of every type. The educated and the uneducated, the generations that are otherwise so profoundly alienated from each other, the professional Jew and the name-changer are all able to reach across the barriers that separate them as soon as a Jewish joke is told" (276). Based on "The Lady of the Lake," it seems that Malamud was rather less sanguine: alienation is the grounding condition of Freeman's life, distancing him from Isabella—and himself.

The first joke Rosenberg and Shapiro recount brings together Catskills-style comedy with a certain enigmatic illogicality—and it is this kind of joke that is at the heart of "The Lady of the Lake." Like Freud's joke about the Galician Jew, this example takes place in the seemingly anonymous context of train travel:

> A lady approaches a very dignified man on the subway and asks him, "Pardon me for asking, but are you Jewish?" He coldly replies, "No." She returns in a moment and apologetically asks again, "Are you sure you're not Jewish?" Yes, he is sure. Still not convinced, she asks a final time, "Are you absolutely sure you're not Jewish?" The man breaks down and admits it, "All right, all right, I am Jewish." To which she makes the rejoinder, "That's funny. You don't look Jewish." (263)

The pleasure of this joke lies in its illogical conclusion: the inquisitor has intuited that the man is Jewish, seemingly because of how he does not look it. This is in contrast with Freud's "gentleman in modern dress": the man on the train in this example does not give any indication of his identity. Here, it is possible for Jews to look *not* Jewish, albeit in a distinctively Jewish way.

For Malamud, a joke of this nature offers the materials and form for fiction that structures, but does not resolve, ambivalent identifications. The joke's pattern of recognition and misrecognition expresses a simultaneous sense of Jewish irreducibility *and* a concern about being understood as Jewish. "The Lady of the Lake" in effect dramatizes key elements of this tradition of joke-telling. Each of Freeman's denials mirror Rosenberg and Shapiro's man on the train while the ending of the story encourages a reassessment of the meaning of Freeman's attempts not to give himself away. The story, in fact, addresses precisely the issues of identity that the *Midstream* essay discusses, both "who am I" and "what am I," as Freeman wishes to be done with the past—everything that makes him what he is, no less—and "the limitations it had imposed upon him" ("Lady" 221). The key development from Malamud's early thoughts for the story is that, in effect, everyone is now hiding their Jewishness, and the tension of the story relies on the complex psychological dynamics at play in such interactions.

In this sense, it is important that the story does not come to rest with an image of Freeman as just a self-deluding schlemiel. Instead, Malamud forces another turn of the screw, as Freeman confronts his Jewishness not by encountering anti-Semitism—even as he hears anti-Semitic assumptions in the words of Isabella—but rather through his misrecognition of a Jewish survivor of

the Shoah. If the story stages a panic around identity that feels drawn from joke-telling, it is Isabella's tattoo that finally brings the story out of Freeman's fantasies and into a confrontation with what cannot be reinvented. Rosenberg and Shapiro write that "[a]mbiguity is the major pervasive element of the current Jewish situation in America," as there is an "enormous distance" from "the pogrom to the gas chamber to the social slight" (264). It is the *unambiguous* nature of Isabella's Jewishness that finally mocks Freeman's untethered self-construction, and it is in this exchange that the irony of the story ultimately lies. Her history is definitive, tattooed on her body, while Freeman's is ambiguous, fantastical, as he turns against "the past" in the hope of a new life. "Circumcision," he merely has to tell himself, is "de rigueur in stateside hospitals" (Malamud, "Lady" 237).

The irruption of the Shoah into the story shifts its terms, in turn offering up compelling thoughts about the relationship between Jewishness and racialized concepts of identity. We see how Freeman, confronting his "almost unendurable" trouble with Jewishness, has projected his understandings of race onto Isabella. Fashioning himself as a white gentile American, he unconsciously constructs her as a white Italian. This process of self-reinvention restricts his ethical imagination, as his newfound gentile identity forces Isabella into a kind of unfreedom, making her believe that a life with him means giving up on her Jewishness. This is the source of her ultimate rejection of his advances. In other words, it is precisely because of his own fragile and constructed whiteness that he is unable to perceive Isabella's racialized Jewishness in the terms that have defined her experience as a European Jew—and she, in turn, is unable to imagine a life with him. This is an ironizing strategy that doubles back on identity talk, unendurable though it may be: just as Freeman becomes white, he limits the freedom of others and, in turn, himself. In this sense, the name "Freeman" is intentionally chosen: in one of Malamud's darkest ironies, Levin chooses to represent his new identity as a gentile through a name profoundly connected to African American histories of enslavement and liberation.

To take these points further, Isabella had been subject to strategies of racialization as a Jew that led to her being transported to and imprisoned at Buchenwald. There is hence an uncomfortable parallel between Isabella's own history of persecution and how Freeman adopts the racial attitudes of white non-Jewish Americans. She feels she cannot be Jewish so long as she is understood in the terms Freeman offers; he may think that being white and non-Jewish offers a way out of history and the limitations it imposes on him, but it does not give Isabella meaningful freedom nor does it give him the capacity to be who he is. To be free in racial society, we may think, requires living with unfreedom—and Freeman's freedom from history, such as it is, is no freedom for Isabella.[7] Becoming white means giving up on the historical implications

of Jewishness and aligning oneself with alternative formations, in this case the deep political and racial unconscious of the United States.

Central to all of these effects, and crucial to the story's development, is Malamud's mischievous dramatization of a kind of unknowing that is specific to Freeman. Between Malamud's first outline in 1950 and his draft in 1957, the story became more and more psychologically complex, moving from its concern with how a woman hides her Jewishness to an interest in how a man misreads her and misunderstands himself. All of this is opened up by the free indirect discourse that Malamud adopts, as he wryly explores the feelings that Rosenberg and Shapiro find are "inherent in the ambiguity of [the Jewish American's] position as a perpetual stranger and marginal man" (263). A kind of neuroticism is ultimately blended into the narrative voice. Note, for example, how when Isabella steps out of the water, we are drawn into and out of the consciousness of "Harry R. Freeman, travelling abroad":

> [S]he had grace to lean on; herself also favored physically—mama, what a queenly high-assed form—itself the cause of grace. Her dark, sharp Italian face had that quality of beauty which holds the mark of history, the beauty of a people and civilization. The large brown eyes, under straight slender brows, were filled with sweet light; her lips were purely cut as if from red flowers; her nose was perhaps the one touch of imperfection that perfected the rest—a trifle long and thin. (Malamud, "Lady" 226)

The first sentence of this passage is interrupted by Freeman's desire ("mama, what a queenly high-assed form"), which cuts through the more moderated language of appreciation ("favored physically"; "cause of grace"). This vision of the desiring tourist hints at the deeper causes of the misjudgments to follow in the subsequent sentences: her "sharp Italian face," which apparently "holds the mark of history, the beauty of a people and civilization." While not explicitly announced, the account of Isabella's Italianness has to be Freeman's, as he seeks to connect her beauty to the national characteristics—a version of racialization—that he has come to Italy as a tourist to experience. With knowledge of the story's conclusion, there are clues that the interpretations of this "New York City boy from way back" are likely to be misguided (226). Her features could instead be read as more stereotypically Ashkenazi in origin, while the "mark of history" is indeed quite literal. The narrative voice both conspires with Freeman and ironizes him, such that his delusions and fears become central to how we both understand and misunderstand Isabella. It is the revelation at the story's end that demonstrates that Freeman's panic about his circumstances has led to an inability to see what is staring him in the face.

Malamud, as he translates a dialect joke into literary fiction, ironizes Freeman such that the story can hold in tension key problems of Jewish American identity. While scholars have debated the significance of the Shoah

for Jewish American self-understanding in the 1950s, Malamud rejects the events in Europe as grounds for a firmer sense of identity.[8] Instead, the Shoah has quite the opposite effect in the story, offering no adequate basis for a universally Jewish experience as it ultimately disturbs rather than sustains connection. The joke is no solvent for difference. Indeed, the thought runs contrary here: in his pursuit of reinvention, Freeman becomes more aligned with a specifically American cultural formation, a neurotic and clumsy Jewish whiteness, than with shared marginality.

In this reading, the Jewish joke-telling tradition on which Malamud draws helps him to move into new and potentially transgressive terrain, ambivalently representing Jewish difference while ironizing efforts to put Jewish American identity on a stronger footing. In other words, Malamud's fictionalizing of the joke encourages a suspicion about what anchors people such as Freeman to their own histories and to the collective experience in Europe. What we see is not a new kind of Jewish pride, Jewish identity, or Jewish self, but rather intersecting lines of uncertainty and eccentricity—a man who is diasporic even to himself. These thoughts are concluded in the story's closing lines when Isabella's breasts, permanently marked as they are with evidence of the Shoah, do not give Freeman what he wants. Instead, his attempt to "clutch, kiss, or suckle them" confirms the crossover from eroticism to something more expressly oedipal, as he looks for the figure of the mother. There is a kind of comic insight in this moment even if it is not available to Freeman, who is left embracing the "moonlit stone" of the imitation statues outside the empty manor house he mistook for the real thing (240).

"Is This What a Jewish Angel Looks Like?"

"Angel Levine," another story collected in *The Magic Barrel*, similarly develops out of joke-telling traditions to deepen its exploration of certain social dynamics for Jews in the United States. This time, though, Malamud also addresses questions of theology and faith—an area of interest that his biographer describes as "risky belief" (Davis 161). While there are no entries in Malamud's notebook relating to "Angel Levine," there are earlier ideas for stories that address similar issues. In a July 1948 entry, in an idea which "began in a dream," he imagined a Black doctor whose "grandparents were slaves" and who was brought up on a "plantation owned by Jews." The doctor has "stuck to the religion and goes every Friday night to services." Both the figure of the Black Jew and the question of belief turn out to be central to "Angel Levine," which Malamud drafted in 1954 (Story Ideas—Oregon). This story would end up being anything but his last word on the entanglement of Jewish Americans and African Americans in the United States—he would further explore these dynamics in "Black Is My Favorite Color" (1963) and *The Tenants* (1971).

"Angel Levine" focuses on "Manischevitz, a tailor, in his fifty-first year," who has recently "suffered many reverses and indignities." As an immigrant Jew, he has been struggling to make it in the United States. His business has burned down, he is penniless, his son "of much promise" died in the war, and his daughter disappeared after an ill-advised marriage. The tailor has a backache and has been "unable to work even as a presser . . . for more than an hour or two daily." His wife, too, "began before his eyes to waste away"; she is "seriously ill" and has taken to her bed (157). Like the Book of Job, with which this story is in dialogue, Manischevitz confronts the belief that had always given him meaning: "'My dear God, sweetheart, did I deserve that this should happen to me?'" He does not have the lawyer's ability to cavil over his circumstances and their wider implications, however. Instead, "recognizing the worthlessness" of his self-pity, "he set aside the complaint and prayed humbly for assistance" (158).

Manischevitz encounters Levine, an African American man, "reading a newspaper" at the table in the tailor's flat (158). After this unexpected guest introduces himself ("'I bear the name of Alexander Levine'"), Manischevitz begins to query him, skeptical that a Black man could possibly be attached to this name. The two speak somewhat at cross-purposes in vernacular that is coded as African American in the case of Levine and Yiddish-inflected in the case of Manischevitz:

> "You said Levine?" he politely inquired.
>
> The Negro nodded. "That is exactly right."
>
> Carrying the jest further, Manischevitz asked, "You are maybe Jewish?"
>
> "All my life I was, willingly."
>
> The tailor hesitated. He had heard of black Jews but had never met one. It gave him an unusual sensation.
>
> Recognizing in afterthought something odd about the tense of Levine's remark, he said doubtfully, "You ain't Jewish anymore?"
>
> Levine at this point removed his hat, revealing a very white part in his black hair, but quickly replaced it. He replied, "I have recently been disincarnated into an angel. As such, I offer you my humble assistance, if to offer is within my province and power." (159)

Manischevitz "had been expecting something," but whatever it was, it was not this. The narrative voice focalizes Manischevitz, asking: "What sort of mockery was it—provided that Levine was an angel—of a faithful servant who had from childhood lived in the synagogues, concerned with the word of God?" (159).

There are two threads of uncertain belief in the story. The first is Manischevitz's as he seeks to understand whether Levine really is a messenger. "'If God sends to me an angel, why a black? Why not a white that there are so many of them?'" (160). In this mood, Manischevitz, "after much self-questioning and continuing doubt," follows Levine to Harlem. Here, he encounters Levine in a degraded state

at a "honky-tonk" (161). While this is off-putting for Manischevitz—his faith in this angel now appearing even more unlikely—he discovers that a world of unbelief is little better. He becomes ever more agonized once he receives bad news from a doctor about Fanny's health:

> Manischevitz visited a synagogue and there spoke to God, but God had absented Himself. The tailor searched his heart and found no hope. When she died, he would live dead. He considered taking his life although he knew he wouldn't. Yet it was something to consider. Considering, you existed. He railed against God—Can you love a rock, a broom, an emptiness? Baring his chest, he smote the naked bones, cursing himself for having, beyond belief, believed. (163)

The story circles around Manischevitz's torment: unable to believe in a Black angel, he faces the collapse of his faith altogether.

It is only on his return to Harlem that Manischevitz opens himself up to the possibility of a divine encounter. He now discovers that the honky-tonk has become "a synagogue in a store"; inside, "four Negroes wearing skullcaps" are discussing and chanting scripture (163). Levine is not present at this scene—he has gone to where the honky-tonk has unaccountably moved. As Manischevitz enters this place, he sees Levine; the putative angel is both sharply attired and drunk. It is in these unlikely circumstances that Manishevitz is finally willing to believe:

> "Mr. Levine," he spoke in a trembly voice. "Is here Manischevitz."
>
> Levine glared blearily. "Speak yo piece, son."
>
> Manischevitz shivered. His back plagued him. Tremors tormented his legs. He looked around, everybody was all ears. . . .
>
> Manischevitz, no end disturbed, considered leaving, but Levine addressed him:
>
> "Kindly state the pu'pose of yo communication with yo's truly."
>
> The tailor wet cracked lips. "You are Jewish. This I am sure." . . .
>
> Tears blinded the tailor's eyes. Was ever man so tried? Should he say he believed a half-drunk Negro was an angel? (165)

In this moment, belief is affirmed not by reason but by election. It is an aleatory world, where faith necessarily involves something of a gamble: "a wheel in his mind whirred: believe, do not, yes, no, yes, no. The pointer pointed to yes, to between yes and no, to no, no it was yes" (165-66). Manischevitz lands on "yes." Levine and Manischevitz return to the tailor's apartment, where, as Manischevitz looks through a window, he sees "a dark figure borne aloft on a pair of strong black wings." The story ends with Fanny out of bed, mopping the floor. "'Believe me,'" Manischevitz tells her, "'there are Jews everywhere'" (166).

The second thread of belief in the story is Levine's, as he, too, is held in a moment of uncertainty—and it is ultimately Manischevitz who releases him

from his degraded condition. Levine is first introduced in the story in a manner that suggests he is Manischevitz's double: soon after the tailor has been seen sitting "reading his Jewish newspaper," Manischevitz comes out of his bedroom to see Levine "reading a newspaper he had folded up to fit into one hand" (158). Like Manischevitz, there is a suggestion that Levine has fallen out of favor with God—or at least struggles with his faith. Manischevitz tests Levine by asking why he does not have any wings: "'Under certain circumstances,'" Levine says, "'we lose privileges and prerogatives upon returning to earth'" (160). Levine's dissolution likewise indicates his own straying. The doubles in the story are hence released from each other in their moment of mutual incarnation: Levine gains his wings, and Manischevitz is restored to belief (and Fanny to her feet). The two threads are tied together in the black feather that falls from Levine as he departs, turning white as it descends—a possibility foreshadowed earlier by the "very white part in [Levine's] black hair" (159).

As Cynthia Ozick suggests, the story relies on the unlikeliness of an African American Jew—an unlikeliness that is modelled for the reader by Manischevitz's response to Levine throughout. "Is it the arrival of a divine messenger we are to marvel at," she asks, "or is it the notion of a black Jew?" (81). In one reading, the extent to which Manischevitz is perturbed by Levine is meant to demonstrate the small-mindedness of this shtetl tailor. The suggestion that he had "heard of black Jews but never met one," and that this gives him an "unusual sensation," is in keeping with this reading (159). So, too, is Levine's question, "'if God sends me an angel, why a black? Why not a white that there are so many of them'" (160). In another reading, though, it is Malamud himself who relies on a framework in which the idea of a Black Jew is an impossibility, and the story derives its energy from this misplaced assumption. This approach is given some weight by his rather awkward attempts at Black vernacular speech in the story—Ozick calls this "Father Divine style" (80)—and the frankly stereotypical representations of African American characters (such as the "big-breasted Negress in a purple evening gown" who dances with Levine [162]).

The crucial passage that figures a Black Yeshiva, in which we might expect to better understand the nature of Jewish practice among those whom Manischevitz seems unable to believe are Jews, does not resolve the issue. On the one hand, it shows Torah study and theological dispute among committed Black believers about "Neshoma" (the soul).[9] On the other hand, a series of missteps suggest that those Malamud represents have a relatively shallow understanding of Jewish religious practices. Ordinarily, one would use a yad to point to parts of the text when reading—but Malamud is at pains to note that they are touching it "with their fingers" ("Angel" 163). Likewise, the participants are using the Torah scroll as part of their day-to-day learning, whereas it would ordinarily only be used for communal ritual purposes at specific moments. Ozick, too, is not quite sure how to parse the text: by the conclusion of the story, she thinks that for Manischevitz

and Malamud the idea that "Black and Jew are one is no miracle." She revises this thought, though, as she acknowledges that "a little more than a decade later, with the publication of *The Tenants*"—Malamud's troubling 1971 novel that directly thematizes racial conflict—"the proposition seems hollow" (81).

I suggest that Ozick struggles to resolve a reading of "Angel Levine" as a whole due to the comic relation to the divine at the story's heart, which Malamud developed from a tradition of Jewish jokes and paradoxical wisdom about God. He, in fact, seems to allude directly to this tradition when Manischevitz wonders if he "was the butt of a jokester" (160). Jeremy Dauber writes that in Hasidic folktales, for example, there is an "emphasis on divine proximity," an "insistence that God is all around us and infinitely reachable, . . . full of humor of various sorts, joyous, wry, rapturous, and the like" (184). While there is no direct evidence that Malamud read these tales as he was writing the stories in *The Magic Barrel*, there are numerous points of convergence. Several such tales are included in the pages that immediately follow the Yiddish proverbs that Malamud copied from *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*. Howe and Greenberg were especially keen, in their book, to promote the qualities of these pieces of wisdom, stressing their modern relevance over their potential antiquarian interest. Folktales, they write in their introduction, "raised the tradition of Yiddish storytelling to a new level of moral and literary value" (24). They likewise suggest in an editors' note that the "cryptic stories" of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav "seem to anticipate some of Kafka's writings" (609).

As with Yiddish literature in general, the 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence of an English language body of Hasidic folktales, amounting to a kind of canon. These are primarily associated with the anthologies of Martin Buber, including postwar works translated into English, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters* (1947) and *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters* (1948). Excerpts from the first volume were published in *Commentary* in January and February 1947.[10] Other discussion of Buber's work took place in the period Malamud was writing, including Leslie Fiedler's 1949 review in *Commentary*, in which he suggests that Buber has "made available to those without adequate Hebrew or Yiddish, even to the utterly un-synagogued, the heart of Hasidism" (196). Walter Kaufmann's review of a number of Buber's volumes was included in the October 1958 issue of *Commentary*, which is immediately followed by Dan Jacobson's review of *The Magic Barrel*. When Jacobson writes that Malamud's stories are "all moral fables of the most serious kind; and there is hardly one that is not also extremely funny," there is an echo of the preceding material on Buber, whom Kaufmann says "has above all reminded us how genuine religion is not a matter of doctrines, concepts, and theologies" (359).

Just as Malamud's writing draws from joke-telling traditions that were being canonized in the period, his encounter with folktales, more limited though it may have been, also seems to have inflected his sense of what the

short story could do. In particular, Malamud likely drew from these tales the enriching sense that Hashem (God) may joke with us, and that we may make our own jests in return. Take for example the bargaining of Abraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt:

> "Lord of the world, I know that I have no virtue and no merit for which, after my death, you could set me in paradise among the righteous. But if you are thinking of putting me in hell among the evil-doers, please remember that I cannot get along with them. So I beg of you to take all the wicked out of hell, so you can put me in." (Buber, *Tales* 111)

Here, it is the opportunity to clear hell of evildoers that the rebbe imagines, at once making his life easier if he cannot reach paradise and, as this enigmatic piece of wisdom suggests, providing an opportunity for the wicked to be renewed. Bargaining familiarly with God, he mixes what Buber, in an account of another Hasidic rebbe, describes as a mixture of "irony and yearning, skepticism and belief, ambition and humility" (*Tales* 29). The pleasure of the tale is ultimately in its combination of futility and daring: the rebbe bargains with God knowing that, unlike the prophets, he will not receive the response for which he asks, or perhaps any response at all. Immediately following the folk stories in the *Treasury* are several from the prankster Hershel Ostropolier, who offers wit of a more daring but often similar kind: "'Hershel, it is said that you don't believe in God.'" "'Why listen to what people say?'" Hershel responds, "'Why not ask the Lord himself?'" (Howe and Greenberg 614).

In a way that is crucial to "Angel Levine," folktales draw from the stuff of everyday life to speculate on matters of divinity. For example, Nahum of Stepinesht asks his disciples who are playing checkers whether they know the rules of the game. What follows is a theological lesson drawn from the movements of the pieces: "'The first is that one must not make two moves at once. The second is that one may only move forward and not backward. And the third is that when one has reached the last row, one may move to where he likes'" (Buber, *Tales* 73). Similarly, David of Lelov explains to his followers the need for equality among believers by drawing on the mistakes a "simple man" has been making while reading his prayers aloud. The man had thought that the two dots that close each verse were "the tiny letter Yud or Yod" (which together are often an abbreviation for God). "'Wherever you find two Jews [Yuds] side by side and on a par, there is the name of God,'" the rebbe explains. "'But whenever it looks to you as if one Jew [Yud] were standing above the other, then they are not Jews [Yuds] and it is not the name of God'" (185). Lessons like these abound in Buber's collections of folktales, as the zaddiks find the materials for divine encounter and understanding in the trades, temples, fish, carts, loaves, prayers, and disputes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hasidic life.

Manischevitz's conclusion that "'there are Jews everywhere'" is recognizably in the tradition of the folktale—both credulous and hopeful, serious and comic, this thought brings wonder back into the world by announcing God's presence in the unlikely figure of the angel Levine. Howe's sense that Malamud's stories "usually involve gambling everything on one or two paragraphs" ("Stories" 30), which is certainly true of this story, can be understood as a shift in genre that takes place at crucial moments in this short fiction. Malamud prepares for these moments in his stories, Howe concludes, by "leading us so surely from one moment of suppressed intensity to another that the burst of pressure which creates the final excitement also dissolves any lingering expectations of ordinary realism" (31). Hasidic folktales enact such transitions as a matter of course as they move from the human world to the divine. Shifting narrative modes in this way amounts to a sort of narrative wagering: central realizations are drawn out of the heart of human affairs and translated to a deeper understanding of God's ways. Yet, as I discuss further below, while the conclusion of "Angel Levine" may be ecstatic, it is still ambivalent, addressing the questions at the core of the doubtful tradition of the divine joke. As Howe and Greenberg anticipated in their canonization of one of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's stories, the cryptic elements of folktales do indeed lend themselves to a later treatment in the terms of literary modernism.

However, I want to focus on another tradition that is closer to hand for "Angel Levine." At the time of its publication, there were numerous jokes circulating in the Borscht Belt that focused on the relationship between African Americans and (white) Jews. Rosenberg and Shapiro call this the "very common 'schwartze' [sic] joke." "Unlikely cultural combinations," they write, give rise to jokes about "Negro Jews," as this kind of humor amounts to the "wish-jokes of the 'ubiquitous Jew.'"[11] They cite the following example: "A little colored boy is named George Washington Cohen. On the first day of school the teacher summons him to her desk after class and asks, 'George, are you Jewish?' 'No mam, I get enough *tzores* being a *schwatzeh*.'" "The Jew," they explain, "is, quite literally, everywhere. Often in disguise, he can be found out only if one knows the proper signs" (272). This description comes remarkably close to the conclusion of Malamud's "Angel Levine," in which Manischevitz, once he has sought to look past disguises, realizes that "there are Jews everywhere" (166).

Manischevitz, a simple man, has his thoughts focalized as he confronts this seemingly unlikely Black Jew. It is as though Malamud has launched from the joke into what it might be like to be confronted with the characters of this joke-telling tradition, somewhere between the world of the Hasidic wisdom tale and that of the immigrant white Jew in America who tells jokes about the ubiquitous Black Jew. Malamud dramatizes this encounter: what would an immigrant tailor think if a figure such as "George Washington Cohen" were to be sitting at

his table, reading a newspaper? What would his experience of that be, and how would he understand it? Like Freeman in "The Lady of the Lake," we stay close to Manischevitz's impressions, reasoning with the tailor through experiences that could lead one to doubt. We notice, for example, the subtle inversions of his speech: "Is this what a Jewish angel looks like?" he asked himself. "This I am not convinced'" (Malamud, "Angel" 160). By imagining the interior life of Manischevitz, enmeshed in these circumstances, Malamud explores what belief means when it is not an abstract set of propositions but rather a risk taken by a man such as Manischevitz and lived in the here and now.

Malamud hence draws on traditions of folktales and joke-telling—including jokes that draw directly on race—to launch an exploration into the nature of belief. His engagement with these traditions expands his fiction, allowing it to address fundamental issues of faith—committed religious practice versus merely dutiful religious observance, belief in the face of all odds. Between the Hasidic tale and the Borscht-belt joke, Malamud "hovers" in the doubt of a figure such as Manischevitz, a man unused to theological explorations, whose own racialized understanding of Jewishness has limited his imagination and, one might think, divine understanding. At his most confident, he is most misguided; when he turns against what he thought he knew, he finds Judaism anew, based not on the rabbis, endogamy, race, or even experience. The pointer of the wheel in Manischevitz's mind whirs between belief and doubt at the end of the story, but he reflects that "one still had to make a choice" (165-66). The great experience of faith for this simpleminded tailor is then finally introduced with a phrase that doubts the hearer will agree: "Believe me" (166). There is a daringness here, as what Buber calls "skepticism and belief" (*Tales* 29) are both available in the telling of the tale, leaving the half-joking wisdom disclosed as instructive. Fanny is out of bed mopping the floor in the story's closing lines—even if we might still wonder if the pointer could move again.

Punch Line

Despite Roth's recollection that Malamud only ever told him "two jokes," it is clear that Malamud loved what they offered (123). His daughter Janna Malamud Smith recalls him often telling a joke about a pious man who "prays to God asking to win the lottery." After many prayers and extensive bargaining, the man's prayers still go unanswered. "'God, I find myself getting angrier and angrier at you. I've served you faithfully, prayed to you that I might win the lottery, but silence,'" he complains. Finally, the sky goes black, and a "voice booms down out of the heavens." God says to the man: "Why don't you give *me* a break? At least buy a ticket" (41-42). As Malamud Smith explains, the joke was a piece of moral advice, centering on self-reliance. It is like the many exhortations we see in Malamud's notebooks to be more committed and to achieve more: "I must work for art," he wrote in August 1949, "I must work harder. I must hit my possible

level" (qtd. in Davis 97). The joke about the lottery was also a lesson for her about her father, who suffered much and found in writing a ticket for escape. As she says elsewhere, "the laughter erupting from baffled loss; the comic narrative that shelters something more poignant, sadder, angrier" (Malamud Smith 17).

Malamud is one of the lesser remembered of the Jewish American writers who redefined American literary fiction after World War II. There has been a tendency to consign him to the tenements and delis that he wrote about, to make him into a version of those characters he based on his father: dutiful, serious, and, above all, Jewish in his smallness, small in his Jewishness. He is barely mentioned in major accounts of the period—Mark McGurl cites him only once in passing in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2011)—and attention to his work has faded compared with that of Philip Roth and Saul Bellow. Part of my ambition in this article has been to develop a language for appreciating Malamud, to show how the joke helps us to make sense of the unusual nature of his writing and demonstrate its ongoing value. In particular, I have shown how he extends the joke through literary fiction, avoiding and deflecting the capture of literary thought by identity claims, instead offering deep psychological explorations of questions that continue to be relevant in American life.

In a late-career interview with Daniel Stern, Malamud reflected on what humor brings to his writing. "Comedy," he said, "is harder to do consistently than tragedy, but I like it spiced in the wine of sadness." It is this comic strand that, by his account, lends his work significance:

> The funny bone is universal. I doubt humorists think of individual taste when they're enticing the laugh. With me humor comes unexpectedly, usually in defence of a character, sometimes because I need cheering up. When something starts funny I can feel my imagination eating and running. I love the distancing—the guise of invention—that humor gives fiction. ("Bernard" 55)

For Malamud, humor is what makes aesthetic experience social rather than private; it is what deprovincializes fiction. This might be the reverse of what we would expect schlocky Jewish comedy in fiction to do, but it is these jokes on which Malamud drew to make his best work inventive and public. Dialect materials, transformed by his literary imagination, are a way of leaving the ghetto behind. As he would have put it, you just have to buy a ticket.

Notes

With thanks to the Bernard Malamud estate for permission to quote from archival materials cited in this article.

1. Philip Davis, Bernard Malamud's biographer, calls this use of a Malamud character in the draft a "dramatic device" that he used to "outwit simple confession" (292).

2. Irving Howe wrote to Bernard Malamud in December 1952 to ask whether he would contribute a translation to the volume: "How is your Yiddish? Together with Eliezer Greenberg, a Yiddish poet & critic, I'm to edit a sizable collection of Yiddish prose fiction in English translation, the bulk of it translated for the first time. . . . Could you try your hand at a story?" (Letter).
3. Malamud claims that this note is from 8 March 1954 (*Talking* 80). However, he appears mistaken. His notebook indicates that the note is in fact from 8 March 1953 (Story Ideas—Oregon). There are numerous other works of Malamud's that would sustain a reading based on their connection with Jewish joke-telling traditions. Among his short stories, we might think of the *shadchan* jokes that underlie "The Magic Barrel" (1954) or those about *schnorrer* figures in "The Jew-Bird" (1963). Malamud's final and unfinished novel *The People* drew from a joke about a Jewish Native American (Malamud Smith 249). The final paragraphs of *The Assistant* (1957) likewise seem to nod toward jokes about conversion. Yet I argue that it was in this mid-1950s period of Malamud's writing, as he sought new capabilities in his short fiction, that the impact of his engagement with jokes can be most easily felt and where the significance for his fiction is clearest.
4. A *schlemiel* is a Yiddish folk archetype that describes a person who is consistently unfortunate, somewhat foolish and pitiable. A well-known description of the schlemiel, which Leo Rosten attributes to a Yiddish proverb, goes as follows: "The *shlemiel* falls on his back and breaks his nose" (348).
5. A few recent examples include the following: in the introduction to the humor section of *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (2001), the editors suggest that "Jewish jokes and humorous stories flourish when traditions are changing or being undermined, when life is precarious, . . . or when the spectacle of human folly or vanity unfolds daily to the perceptive observer" (Chametzky et al. 311). Jeremy Dauber describes what he sees as the seven types of Jewish humor, and sets the following condition for it: "*Jewish humor must have something to do with either contemporary Jewish living or historical Jewish existence*" (xii-xiii). The "something to do with" again functions to bring humor under the sign of history and experience, such that comic expression advances claims about ethnic distinctiveness. Dauber's reading of Malamud is perfunctory, as he suggests that Malamud gained wider acclaim when he "turned his energy for writing religious allegories into a Christian idiom" (192).
6. The timeline associated with the drafting of "The Lady of the Lake" means that Malamud would not have read Bernard Rosenberg and Gilbert Shapiro's essay before finishing his story. He records in a note that he wrote "The Lady of the Lake" in October 1957 (Note). While not as culturally significant as *Commentary* or *Partisan Review*, *Midstream* was an important periodical in the lively intellectual and literary cultures of New York in the 1950s. Published by the Theodor Herzl Foundation, it often featured works by those whom

Malamud would have seen as his contemporaries, including Isaac Bashevis Singer and Isaac Rosenfeld. *Midstream*, though, was distinguished by "focusing consistently and explicitly upon Jewish-interest themes" (Katz 62). Irving Howe's review of *The Magic Barrel* was published in the Summer 1958 issue of *Midstream*.

7. If there is a joke that makes this point, it is the one in common circulation in the United Kingdom, in which an Orthodox Jew, in an attempt to become English, has his peyot cut off. As the locks fall to the floor, he starts to cry. This is not, we discover, because of the loss of his hair, but because "we lost India."
8. See, for example, Hasia Diner, who contests Peter Novick's well-known conclusion:

> Overall, [in the later 1960s] there was a shift away from the posture of the earlier period when American Jews rejected the status of "victim community," and in consequence marginalized the Holocaust. Now the posture adopted by an increasing number of Jewish leaders—and embraced by a substantial segment of American Jewry—was one in which Jews defined themselves by their history of victimization and in which the Holocaust became the central symbol of Jewish identity. (171)

Diner, by contrast, concludes: "The paradigm of an amnesiac American Jewry during the postwar era had been built on slipshod scholarship that put ideology over evidence" (9).

9. Cynthia Ozick dismissively calls this passage a "Baptist theology session" (80), perhaps because of its rhetoric of call and response between leaders and students.
10. See Martin Buber's "Cedars of Lebanon: Tales of the Hasidim" (1947) and "Cedars of Lebanon: More Tales of the Hasidim" (1947).
11. Of course, these jokes are unlikely to be funny for Black Jews. There is a significant volume of writing about the experience of marginalization specific to Jews of color. Katya Gibel Azoulay's interview subjects in *Black, Jewish, and Interracial: It's Not the Color of Your Skin, but the Race of Your Kin, and Other Myths of Identity* (1997), for example, often speak of the difficulty of being understood as Jews racialized as Black, as they navigate the spaces between intimate and public spheres, and between divergent concepts of identity shaped by Halacha and American racial thought. "I don't think of myself as Jewish a lot," says one interviewee, "And I think that has a lot to do with how you're perceived. Maybe if I looked more mixed" (159). Michael Rogin argues that racial minstrelsy from white Jews, such as in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), functions to "transfer identities from immigrant Jew to American" (95). Likewise, we might wonder if jokes about Black Jews in effect assert the whiteness of the Jewish joke-teller.

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