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THE LIVING FAITH: A STUDY OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Rice University

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THE LIVING FAITH: A STUDY
OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

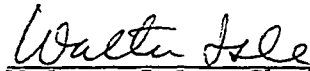
by

RUTH KNAFO SETTON

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

THE LIVING FAITH: A STUDY OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

by

Ruth Knafo Setton

To examine Isaac Bashevis Singer's writing as fairly and profoundly as possible, we must see him as a Jewish story-teller, a man with ghosts in his eyes. His life's mission is to resurrect, in the pages of literature, a tiny world that was brutally, senselessly extinguished from the face of the earth: that of the poverty-ridden ghettos and shtetls inhabited by the Jews of Eastern Europe--and in particular, Poland--before the Nazi Holocaust. What the Holocaust tore asunder, Singer the artist attempts to mend. He is the last survivor, as it were, and there is no one left but him to write an epitaph for the Polish Jews who were massacred. Singer is haunted by a moment frozen in time, branded on the mind. Wherever he is, the flimsy veil of reality is torn, revealing the grim vividness of Poland before Hitler. In his books, Singer is always a boy and Warsaw is always on the verge of destruction.

The mere existence today of the Jewish religion and the survivors of the Holocaust is a miracle, an enigma,

unaccounted for in a world that seems bent on their obliteration. Judaism, for Singer, is primarily a living faith--one that has managed to survive despite countless obstacles from both within and without because of pride, isolation, acceptance of its tradition and the will to believe.

Examining Singer's art in the context of his living faith is an exhilarating and poignant experience that takes us through all his major novels that have been translated in English: Satan in Goray, The Family Moskat, The Manor and The Estate, The Slave, The Magician of Lublin, Enemies and Shosha. Each of the five chapters is devoted to the study of one or two of his novels, emphasizing those aspects which most emphatically illustrate his view of Jewishness.

Through his breathtaking prose, Singer has reminded the modern Jew--and indeed all men--of the priceless secret of survival: that it is only by studying the past and learning from it that the Jew can hope to carve a noble, proud destiny. He has given the modern Jew "a certain bridge" leading directly from his past to his future. Singer's tales, which are simultaneously timeless and contemporary, provide a means of keeping the Jewish dream alive, of building up the mythology of the Jews, thereby giving them pride in their heritage. His ardent faith is based on survival, but its heart lies in the concept of recreation. As Singer's life is dedicated to reviving Polish Jewry through fiction, his protagonists are faced with the

enormous responsibility of re-creating Judaism in the void, after a pogrom or the Holocaust have literally swept their people away. In an effort to fight oblivion--to keep their faith alive--these men, literally or symbolically, echo Moses on Mount Sinai by engraving the Jewish laws in granite and in their hearts.

The tree of life is Singer's metaphor for the living faith as it is reborn in his writing. After winter comes the spring with its lush re-creation of nature; although the tree of life is constantly in the process of being destroyed, it is as constantly in the process of being renewed--either through the miracle of faith or the art of literature. Like the phoenix the house of Israel rises from its ashes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Key to Short Titles used in Text	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
<u>CHAPTER</u>	
I. RE-CREATION	12
II. A JEW IS A JEW IS A JEW	39
III. "THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE".	74
IV. "CHILDREN FROM THE CHAMBER OF YEARNING"	108
V. "DANCERS UPON GRAVES"	141
CONCLUSION	174
GLOSSARY	180
BIBLIOGRAPHY	186

KEY TO SHORT TITLES USED IN THE TEXT

<u>Boy</u>	-- <u>A Little Boy in Search of God</u>
<u>Court</u>	-- <u>In My Father's Court</u>
<u>Crown</u>	-- <u>A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories</u>
<u>Enemies</u>	-- <u>Enemies, A Love Story</u>
<u>Estate</u>	-- <u>The Estate</u>
<u>Friday</u>	-- <u>Short Friday and Other Stories</u>
<u>Gimpel</u>	-- <u>Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories</u>
<u>Kafka</u>	-- <u>A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories</u>
<u>Magician</u>	-- <u>The Magician of Lublin</u>
<u>Man</u>	-- <u>A Young Man in Search of Love</u>
<u>Manor</u>	-- <u>The Manor</u>
<u>Moskat</u>	-- <u>The Family Moskat</u>
<u>Nobel</u>	-- <u>Nobel Lecture</u>
<u>Passions</u>	-- <u>Passions</u>
<u>Satan</u>	-- <u>Satan in Goray</u>
<u>Séance</u>	-- <u>The Séance and Other Stories</u>
<u>Shosha</u>	-- <u>Shosha</u>
<u>Slave</u>	-- <u>The Slave</u>
<u>Spinoza</u>	-- <u>The Spinoza of Market Street</u>

INTRODUCTION

To examine Isaac Bashevis Singer's writing as fairly and profoundly as possible, we must see him as a Jewish story-teller, a man with ghosts in his eyes. His life's mission is to resurrect, in the pages of literature, a tiny world that was brutally, senselessly extinguished from the face of the earth: that of the poverty-ridden ghettos and villages inhabited by the Jews of Eastern Europe--and in particular, Poland--before the Nazi Holocaust. Singer has taken upon himself the amazing, awesome responsibility of re-creating the now-vanished world of the shtetls and ghettos of Poland. In the pages of his books, Polish Jews eat and worry and struggle--as though they had never been destroyed. They are ghosts that walk, talk, and even marry, unaware that they are dead.

If Singer has an obsession, it is surely this: that "literature must have an address. . .it cannot be in a vacuum."¹ Jewishness is his address, as it were. It is 10 Krochmalna Street in Warsaw where he lived as a boy, and more. It is an entire way of life that disappeared with Hitler and that has resurfaced, rather shame-faced and proud, like a man long-supposed dead, in the hearts of New York, Miami and Tel Aviv. The sickly-grey pallor and wide, tired eyes of a boy with flaming red sidelocks, unraveling

the still-alive Torah: this is the heart of Singer's art. He is haunted by a photograph of a moment frozen in time, branded on the mind. No matter where he is or what he is doing, the past resurfaces, blocking out the present. Although Singer has lived in America now for more than half his life, the cozy, relative luxury in America seems a hallucination that can be momentarily erased by the grimness of Polish misery, poverty and persecution: without warning, "the American dream gradually dissolves and harsh Polish reality returns" (Séance, 65). When one of his characters, a survivor of the concentration camps, recounts a vision she had: an eerie glimpse of Hitler, incongruously seated in a cafeteria on Broadway, the author-narrator, at first doubtful, finally declares, "If time and space are nothing but forms of perception, as Kant argues, and quality, quantity, causality are only categories of thinking, why shouldn't Hitler confer with his Nazis in a cafeteria on Broadway?" (Kafka, 95). No matter what the locale of his stories is, it is always pogrom-ridden Poland and the characters are all Jewish ghosts who have miraculously survived to tell the tale.

Jewishness cannot be denied; it is a fundamental, inherent part of his characters. They may fight it; but in the end, it always regains its power--if not in life, then in death--as the witnesses of the faithless Clara's death discover in The Estate: "The nose grew longer and acquired

a Semitic curve, as if during her lifetime Clara had been able to keep it in check" (Estate, 288). One can imagine the God of the Jews laughing as He watches His creatures squirming in a futile attempt to deny their very essence. God is invoked, blessed, shouted at, wrestled with, praised, or simply delighted in, on almost every page of Singer's oeuvre. Singer may rail against petty doctrine and excessively harsh dogma and protest about revelation, but his faith has not wavered: "I always believed in God," he repeats again and again. What is Jewishness to Singer? He sees it primarily as a faith that has managed to survive despite countless obstacles from both within and without because of pride, isolation, acceptance of its tradition and the will to believe. Encompassing man's constant recreation of his faith and his world which is pantheistically, gloriously alive with the presence of God, the living faith is the heart and soul of Judaism as the creators of the Torah envisioned it thousands of years ago: a pure, separate race dedicated to the exaltation and worship of their one God and to the communication of His essence by their mere presence on earth. The Jews exist because of God and God exists because of the Jews; it is a complex, exciting, intimate relationship that refuses to die-- pogroms, inquisitions and the Holocaust notwithstanding.

The living faith is the faith of a mystic, a loner, one who remains a Jew despite problems, questions and

skepticism. To be or not to be--a Jew, that is the ultimate dilemma of Singer's protagonists. His tales are moving evocations of the struggles within intelligent, sensitive seekers to find a spiritual resting place. This is a difficult task, as we shall see, by their disturbing, self-mocking stories that end inconclusively, with questions left unanswered, mysteries unresolved. His metaphor for life is that of the quest, the searcher seeking yet finding no answers along a dangerous, distracting road filled with seductive by-ways, the beckoning of demonic fingers and invisible pitfalls. His characters are passionate explorers, discovering themselves and the world around them, trying to understand truth, to live with goals beyond that of survival (if the world will let them), to search for meaning, for a clue, a divine hand, to guide them in the right direction--assuming there is a right direction. Man is torn between two conflicting fates as he confronts his destiny: whether to flee into the "garden of earthly delights" where lust, abandon and chaos rule; or to remain strong and righteous, to evade temptation by lifting himself above the garden in his search for God and truth.

Examining Singer's art in the context of his living faith is an exhilarating endeavor that will take us through all his major novels that have been translated into English. Each of the five chapters is devoted to the study of one or two of his novels, emphasizing those parts which most

emphatically illustrate his view of Jewishness. All the chapters begin with a brief analysis of a short story of Singer's which seems to illuminate the message of the entire section. Each chapter focuses on one aspect of the living faith.

In Chapter One, "Re-creation," we shall study The Slave, which is Singer's most luminous description of a timeless situation that often recurs in his writing: a man, Jacob, and his religion, Judaism, struggling to survive in a world whose goal is their obliteration. Jacob, a prisoner in exile, finds that he must echo Moses' creation of Judaism by carving the Jewish laws onto a rock to inscribe them forever in granite and in his mind. Singer himself echoes God's creation of the universe by reconstructing his world as if it still exists. Re-creation also includes procreation, of course; witnessing the conversion of the peasant girl Jacob loves into a pious daughter of Israel shows us that from lust to sainthood is one step--when coupling is sanctified by occurring within a religious framework.

In Chapter Two, we move from the eternal world of The Slave and its portrayal of the rebirth of faith to the historical, dramatic confrontation at the turn of the century between the Hasidic Jews of the ghettos and shtetls and the modern culture of Western Europe. The sophisticated worldly ethos is very tempting to the young twentieth

century Jews in Singer's two historical sagas, The Family Moskat and The Manor and The Estate (the last two are one long novel). Many of them turn to assimilation, conversion, hiding in "isms" (for example: Communism, Bundism, Fascism, and so on) and emulation of gentile behavior in the hope of thereby camouflaging their Jewishness. Singer, however, sees these movements as evasions of truth; the approaching Holocaust soon gives the deluded Jews of The Family Moskat and The Manor and The Estate a harsh reminder that "A Jew is a Jew is a Jew," no matter what party he belongs to or what parties he attends.

In Chapter Three, we encounter a unique case, that of Yasha Mazur, The Magician of Lublin. Yasha wavers on the tightrope between "The Sacred and the Profane," between the traditional Jewish faith and the modern worldly ethos. In his soul-searching, he is the most modern of Singer's protagonists; his conclusion, however, is as surprising and incomparable as he is himself. He manages to reject both the traditional faith and the seductive offerings of the modern world; and remains alone, hovering somewhere between life and death. Challenging God is only one of the difficulties Yasha contends with in his life as a Jew. Yasha's story leads us to the belief that "the Jewish question must be lived rather than studied."²

Chapter Four explores a fascinating, recurrent phenomenon in Jewish history that has paradoxically

contributed both to Judaism's downfall and to its miraculous survival: the will to believe. This encompasses the overwhelming dream of the Messianic Era that consoled the Jews in their wretchedness by promising them a better tomorrow. The "will to believe" is what passes as religion when nothing else is left; it is the last foothold of the desperate who need to cling to something, anything. "Children from the Chamber of Yearning" is the Zohar's term for those who seek profound, mystical forms of knowledge and awareness; I find it quite appropriate for the wistful, childlike Hasidim in Satan in Goray who were beguiled by their "will to believe" into accepting Sabbatai Zevi as their Messiah. The religious hysteria that follows Zevi's exposure as a charlatan, as described in Satan in Goray, forces the reader himself to realize how difficult it is to distinguish between good and evil, true and false, when one is blinded by the "will to believe" that can magically transform false Messiahs into true ones.

Chapter Five confronts the most painful era in Jewish history: the Holocaust, when six million Jews were murdered. In Shosha, we observe the Jews marching to their own destruction in pre-war Poland, trapped like beasts in a cage by that same "will to believe" that caused so much anguish during Sabbatai Zevi's reign. Now, however, it fools them into thinking that Hitler cannot really mean to do what he proclaims. Enemies, which takes place several

years later, introduces the survivors of the Holocaust: a motley, bitter, half-dead crew, who enact a farce, the plot and meaning of which they are unaware. Although they wander about New York City, their eyes reflect only the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps. "Dancers upon Graves" is both the title of the chapter and a description of the precarious Jewish position at nearly all times in world history. Anti-Semitism has led countless Jews through the centuries to the undeserved, premature graves of martyrs. Survival is the message that Singer conveys in Enemies and Shosha, and the key to survival is memory. Do not forget, Singer cautions the Jews, or it can easily happen again. We leave the survivors gathering up the scraps, remembering, and forcing others to remember, as Singer himself does, through the very potent means of his art.

Singer himself seems to be a direct descendant of the self-acknowledged "moon man" and famous Tzaddik, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, whose mystical, symbolic fairy tales set a new, fantastic level in the Jewish tradition of hiding wisdom within a story--as in the Kabbalistic and Hasidic legendary anecdotes, the Midrash and the aggadic tales which comprise part of the Talmud. Rabbi Nachman and Singer both draw heavily on the Kabbalah for spiritual inspiration. The importance of the Kabbalah is that although it led to many foolish Jewish delusions, it also helped the Jews survive with its unearthly beauty, its message of hope and

nobility concealed within allegorical, flowery symbolic tales.

Every word is a tale, they said in Bratzlav. Example: Torah. Or Talmud. Or Zohar. The tale of the Law is as important as the Law. And it is more profound than its commentaries.³

Everything in Rabbi Nachman's tales exists on the same shimmering level--as in the Odyssey. The reader must search for what is important--or unimportant. As with Singer, dead-ends, false clues and miraculous visions displace each other; with layers upon layers of meaning and mystery, deception is the rule. The living faith, as espoused by both Rabbi Nachman and Singer, is one that can bear uncertainty, that can exist simultaneously on several levels at once, and that is not limited by one's eyes or ears or theories. It is a quest for both spiritual and earthly, human joy in a world throbbing with life. Every tale or anecdote attributed to Rabbi Nachman points to his overwhelming Kabbalistic delight in God.

Once when Rabbi Nachman was walking outside the city in a grassy field he said to his companions: If only you were worthy to hear the sound of the songs and praises of the grass. How each blade of grass sings to God, without any egoistical motive and without any thought or expectation of reward. How beautiful it is to hear their song, and how good to serve God in their midst, in awe.⁴

Singer echoes Rabbi Nachman in urging man to worship God as the grass does, joyously. Their living faith is perhaps most simply described as a profound belief in the wondrous

fact that all God's world is alive. The wisdom and genius of Rabbi Nachman, the simultaneous immediacy and timelessness that illuminate his legacy of tales are carried on by Singer, who forges yet another link in the chain of Jewish story-tellers.

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer--and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the 'Maggid' of Mezeritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers--and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs--and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the story-teller adds, the story which he told had the⁵ same effect as the actions of the other three.

NOTES

¹Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A Conversation with I.B.S.," Marshall Breger and Bob Barnhart, in Critical Views of I.B.S., ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 35.

²Elie Wiesel, quoting Rebbe Wolfe of Zhitomer, in Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 92.

³Souls on Fire, p. 187.

⁴The Wisdom of the Jewish Mystics, ed. Alan Unterman (New York: New Directions, 1976), pp. 69-70.

⁵Gershom Scholem, quoting from a story he heard told by S. J. Agnon, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken, 1961), pp. 349-350.

Chapter I

RE-CREATION

One man is equivalent to
all Creation.

One man is a world in
miniature.

--Rabbi Nathan

A recurrent situation in Isaac Bashevis Singer's fiction is that of the lone survivor of a "holocaust" attempting to recall his past and his tradition while faced with the enormous, awesome responsibility of re-creating his faith. Building on the ruins of his destroyed world, he strives to re-create Judaism in the void, transforming ancient laws into living truths. The greatest problem of such a survivor is not the forging of a new tradition based on the old; rather it is the renewal of his faith in God after a massacre which has literally swept his people away. Jacob, in The Slave, who has lived through Chmielnicki's pogroms, and Herman Broder, in Enemies, who spent the years of the Holocaust hidden in a hayloft, are Singer's two most notable survivors. Both Herman and Jacob confront a world which must be newly rebuilt after a holocaust; Hitler's is, of course, on a much larger scale than Chmielnicki's, but both men dedicated their atrocities to fulfilling the

same goal: that of wiping the Jews off the face of the earth. Herman is paralyzed by the horror; he wants only to hide, to be forgotten by man--like Kafka's cockroach he wishes to scurry through time. Jacob, on the other hand, renews the Jewish race by producing a son of Israel. Although he never permits himself to doubt the existence of God, he does refuse to grant God the quality of mercy: "It was difficult to believe in God's mercy when murderers buried children alive. But God's wisdom was evident everywhere" (Slave, 19). Jacob's faith gives him the strength to transcend the difficulties of starting life all over again.

"When He created man," writes Elie Wiesel, "God gave him a secret--and that secret was not how to begin but how to begin again."¹ Re-creation is the heart of life; for the Jews who must face the bitter task of reconstructing their lives and their worlds, it is the key to survival. Singer joins in the universal process of Jewish re-creation by himself resurrecting a world of the dead. What the Holocaust tore asunder, Singer the artist attempts to mend. He feels a responsibility to re-create and re-interpret his now-vanished world. He is the last survivor as it were, and there is no one left but him to write an epitaph for the Polish Jews who were massacred in the Holocaust. He compares himself to "The Last Demon" in the story of that name, poring over a Yiddish storybook discovered in the

dusty ruins of Tishevitz "after the great catastrophe" (Friday, 145). Tishevitz is a Polish ghost town, eerie, silent, nearly deserted. The demon bemoans his fate which is irrevocably intertwined with that of the Jews: "There are no more Jews, no more demons" (Friday, 156).

Messiah did not come for the Jews, so the Jews went to Messiah. There is no further need for demons. We have also been annihilated. I am the last, a refugee (Friday, 157).

The demon feeds on the Hebrew letters of the Yiddish storybook; they allow him to sustain the illusion that he lives in an eternal present. "I speak in the present tense," he announces, "as for me time stands still" (Friday, 146). In a manner of speaking, Singer's writing is also in the present tense, dedicated to preserving "a world that is no more." It is an exhilarating yet poignant mission shared by the author and the reader: to transcend reality through art, to render a world immortal by reconstructing it as if it had never been destroyed. "The past is as present as today," writes Singer in Enemies (Enemies, 30). Wherever he is, the flimsy veil of reality is torn, revealing the grim vividness of Poland before Hitler. In his books, Singer is always a boy and Warsaw is always on the verge of destruction. This is especially evident in Shosha where Singer's alter ego, Aaron Greidinger, marries a childhood friend, a retarded girl for whom "time stands still," and with whom he can live in eternal childhood--at least until

the arrival of the Nazis. Singer's fear--echoed by the demon--is of the slow death of the Yiddish language which may signal the collapse of a noble, martyred people. "When the last letter is gone," shrieks the demon, "The last of the demons is done" (Friday, 158). It is only through Yiddish literature that the sources, the reasons and the mystery of the brutal, senseless extinguishment of the Jews of Eastern Europe can begin to be comprehended. Only by studying their past can the Jews hope to create a future. According to Singer,

We are living in an age of physical and spiritual catastrophe but also of glorious resurgence. . . when, on the one hand, millions of Jews broke away from Jewishness and reared a generation of assimilationists while Hitler and Stalin annihilated a large part of our people, and when, on the other hand, Jews stubbornly and heroically built a Jewish state and created a Jewish literature in Yiddish and Hebrew. To understand the enigma of our age, its incredible dilemmas and contradictions, they will have to turn back constantly to the shtetl, to Yiddish literature What is genuine in Yiddish literature will be studied and analyzed not merely as literature but also as a source to help them understand our wild impulse for self-destruction and our colossal will for renewal, two antithetical forces which arose simultaneously and exist side by side.²

The Jewish "impulse for self-destruction" is examined in Chapter 5. In this chapter we will explore the "colossal will for renewal" as it is embodied in the love between Jacob and Wanda/Sarah and the love they have for God. The last great Yiddish writer and the last Jewish demon have lived to tell the tale. Like the Jewish religion, their

mere existence is a miracle, an enigma, unaccounted for in a world that seems bent on their destruction. As Singer's life's work is devoted to reviving Polish Jewry through fiction, Jacob's task, in The Slave, echoing Moses' creation of Judaism in Egypt, is to re-create his faith in a country of idolaters.

The Slave, Singer's most luminous, timeless novel, unfolds in a vast, meaningful landscape of Biblical proportions and grandeur. It is a book of miracles--in which man is as great a miracle as God or nature. Singer describes a mystically rich universe where God is immanent and revelation is imminent. The reader is constantly aware of God's presence: "an eye was watching, a hand guiding, each sin had its significance" (Slave, 268). The novel is divided into three parts: respectively entitled "Wanda," "Sarah," and "The Return." The first two parts contain the bulk of the novel; "The Return" is a brief epilogue which takes place twenty years after the end of the second part. Each section explores Jacob's character in different surroundings or under different circumstances. Somehow, despite all external pressures and hardships, Jacob remains himself: inviolate, unique, proud--much as the Jewish religion itself has survived seemingly endless persecution and countless pogroms. Jacob brings to mind the Biblical saying, "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his eyes" (Judges 17:6).

He is a righteous man, strong, honest and dignified, whose creation disproves Dostoevski's famous dictum that "All writers. . .who have tried to portray the positively good man have always failed." Jacob single-handedly has the potential to restore his faith, to form a new dynasty with his mate, Wanda/Sarah, and to add to the Jewish tradition. He is a free man among slaves--himself a slave only to God. Having learned early that "one cannot serve God and man at the same time," he devotes himself to helping his fellow men while serving only God (Friday, 257).

The Slave opens in 1652, four years after the Chmielnicki massacres. Jacob of Josefov, a pious scholar who had fled from the Cossacks, not knowing whether his wife and two children--and the rest of the townspeople--were alive or dead, is now twenty-nine years old, the slave of a Polish peasant, Jan Bzik. Stranded, and a prisoner in a remote pagan village--a veritable Gomorrah of mental depravity and physical deformity--he is as solitary as if he were the last--or the first--man on earth. The pagans are closer to the level of beasts than of man. Their primitive minds have halted brusquely at the first stage of evolution and never progressed: "Shame was unknown to them as if they had been conceived before the eating of the forbidden fruit" (Slave, 5).

'Lay me,' a girl would shamelessly demand, but Jacob acted as if he were deaf and blind. It was not only because fornication was a mortal

sin, these women were unclean, and had vermin in their clothes and elflocks in their hair; often their skins were covered with rashes and boils, they ate field rodents and the rotting carcasses of fowls. Some of them could scarcely speak Polish, grunted like animals, made signs with their hands, screamed and laughed madly. The village abounded in cripples, boys and girls with goiters, distended heads and disfiguring birth marks; there were also mutes, epileptics, freaks who had been born with six fingers on their hands or six toes on their feet. In summer, the parents of these deformed children kept them on the mountains with the cattle, and they ran wild. There, men and women copulated in public. . . .
(Slave, 15-16).

Dziobak, the immoral, thieving priest of the peasants, mouths Christian proverbs while inciting his followers to murder Jacob. The pagans regard Jacob with the same mixture of awe and contempt that the Egyptian idolaters must have exhibited upon their first confrontation with the Jew and his new, abstract faith. Compared to the pagans' religion, which is an orgiastic, lewd, sadistic form of witchcraft, the Jew's curious rituals dedicated to an invisible God seem almost frightening, certainly foreign and threatening. In his description of early Israel, Heinrich Heine simultaneously seems to paint a vivid picture of Jacob the Jew surrounded by his pagan neighbors--ironically his "masters."

To me, Judea always seemed like a piece of the West that had got lost in the middle of the East. With its spiritualistic faith, its severe, chaste, even ascetic ways--in short, with its abstract inwardness--this land and its people always formed the strangest contrast to neighbor

countries and peoples devoted to the most luxurious and voluptuous cults of nature, and to a life spent in bacchantic revels. Israel sat piously under its fig tree, sang the praises of the invisible God and practiced virtue and righteousness, while in the temples of Babel, Ninevah, Sidon and Tyre, those bloody and lascivious orgies were celebrated whose mere description still makes our hair stand on end. Considering these surroundings, we cannot marvel enough at Israel's early greatness.³

In his solitude Jacob draws strength from two sources: his faith in God and his forbidden love for Wanda, Jan Bzik's widowed daughter. Nicknamed "The Lady," Wanda has a lust for learning about Judaism--as it is embodied in Jacob's robust physique. Her sweet strength recalls that of Ruth. She speaks

to him exactly as Ruth had spoken: 'Where thou goest, I go. Thy people are my people. Thy God is my God.' Her body exuded the warmth of the sun, the breezes of summer, the fragrance of wood, field, flower, leaf, just as milk gave off the odor of the grass the cattle fed on (Slave, 71).

Unfortunately, their love is condemned by both God's law and man's law. Struggling to forget Wanda's sensual, tempting nearness, Jacob retreats within himself, trying to recall the precepts of Judaism. In an effort to fight oblivion--to keep his faith alive--he "tortures memory" to re-create his religion: echoing Moses on Mount Sinai he carves the Jewish laws onto a large rock:

His was a never ending struggle with Purah, the lord of oblivion. In this battle force and persuasion were both necessary; patience was also required, but concentration was most important of all. . . . He mined within himself as men dig

for treasure in the earth. It was slow work; he scratched sentences, fragments of sentences, single words into the stone. The Torah had not disappeared. It lay hidden in the nooks and crannies of his brain (Slave, 44).

These laws engraved in granite--and in his heart--are his major weapon against the enveloping, encroaching "darkness of Egypt" (Slave, 57).

Jacob is, however, "a man at war with himself": the battle between the spirit and the flesh, good and evil, rages within him until he finally succumbs to his passion for Wanda (Slave, 40). Together they transcend lust and discover love. To his surprise, Jacob finds in this illiterate peasant girl an eager pupil thirsting for knowledge. His words about God and Judaism "had fallen on her brain like a shower on a parched field" (Slave, 77). Her progress is so swift that soon Jacob finds her questions about God's mercy, injustice and human suffering unanswerable. To hold her in his arms, however--to teach her about his God and to feel her responding passionately, emotionally and spiritually--re-awakens his joy in life.

Without warning, at the height of their intimacy, Jacob is ransomed by a group of Jews from his home town. Half-regretfully, he leaves the pagan village and Wanda for Josefov--which has meanwhile undergone a complete transformation.

Josefov was no longer Josefov. Everything was gone: the synagogue, the study house, the ritual bath, the poor house. The murderers had

even torn up the tombstones. Not a single chapter of the Holy Scroll, not a page from the books in the study house remained intact. The town was inhabited by fools, cripples, and madmen. 'Why did this happen to us?' one of the men asked. 'Josefov was a home of Torah' (Slave, 99).

Jacob wanders amid the ruins, horrified by the extent of the desolation. His wife and children, he learns, are dead, as are most of his relatives. Josefov is filled with mentally and physically scarred Jews, deserted wives, Jewish women raped by Cossacks, mere remnants of human beings. Even the holy Talmud seems changed in the light of such misery: "There was not a prayer, law, passage in the Talmud that did not seem altered to him" (Slave, 103). The Jews he had missed so desperately during his years of bondage and the faith he had tried so fervently to recall seem somehow disappointing, diminished, when viewed close-up. The people are hypocritical, appearing to have "learned nothing from their ordeal; rather suffering had pushed them lower" (Slave, 114). They obey only part of the Torah and feel that they are serving God.

They wanted to be kind to God not to man; but what did God need of man and his favors? What does a father want from his children but that they should not do injustice to each other² (Slave, 205).

Their envy, greed and false piety revolt Jacob. A misfit among both pagans and Jews, he is a man alone.

In an about-face, the former slave, Jacob, returns to free his captor, Wanda, from ignorance. His voyage

parallels the Exodus which is an allegory in the Kabbalah for mystical seekers of knowledge and awareness. As Moses returned to Egypt to teach his people who were asleep and knew not that they slept (i.e., they preferred slavery to freedom), so does Jacob go back for Wanda to instruct her in the true essence of Judaism which is "the relation between man and his fellows" (Slave, 230). Wanda converts to Judaism--and is given the name traditionally bestowed upon all female converts: Sarah. Her inability to learn Yiddish leads her to pose as a mute. Known as Dumb Sarah, she and Jacob wander until they arrive in Pilitz, a small Jewish community rivalling Josefov in corruption and hypocrisy.

Legalisms and rituals proliferated without diminishing the narrow-mindedness of the people; the leaders ruled tyrannically; hatred, envy, and competition never ceased. Before Yom Kippur the Jews made peace with one another, but the night after quarrels broke out all over again. Perhaps that was why God sent men like Chmielnicki, why the exile lasted so long and the Messiah did not come (Slave, 222-3).

God's faith in Pilitz has diminished into mere dogma without spirit--hence, into meaninglessness. Again, surrounded by enemies who envy his natural nobility and doomed to secrecy because of Wanda/Sarah's pretended muteness, Jacob and Sarah retreat to their cottage where at night he continues to instruct her in Torah and the ideals of his faith which differ so pointedly from the

reality surrounding them. The abusive insults of the jealous women of Pilitz Sarah must stoically, silently endure contradict everything Jacob has taught her about religion. Through her eyes, Jacob is forced to perceive the vast gulf that extends between God's law and man's law. He realizes that his faith is an individual, mystical one; he finds it nearly impossible, as do most of Singer's heroes, to worship God among men. Jacob's faith is a return to Heine's description of early Israel: pious, righteous, noble. For Jacob, as for the great Tzaddik, Rabbi Bunam, man and God are alone in the universe.

When I look at the world, it sometimes seems
to me that every man is a tree in a wilderness,
and that God has no one in his world but him,
and that he has no one to turn to, save God.⁴

When God and man find each other--and the very crux of Judaism is the fact that God needs man as much as man needs God--true faith is born. In the words of Abraham J. Heschel, "Jewish existence is living shared with God."⁵

Wanda/Sarah and Jacob seem to have been re-created in their new lives in Pilitz; the past is "so distant it seemed to have taken place in another life" (Slave, 206). One constant, however, remains: sorrow. Wanda/Sarah is a martyr, a creature born of suffering--and who dies of sorrow while giving birth to a boy, Benjamin (son of sorrow). Her screams during labor betray her true identity; dying, she accuses the people of Pilitz of being false to

both God and man. When they attempt to silence her, she cries, "My sorrow speaks, not I" (Slave, 212). Upon her death Jacob realizes that his "love for her had begun with lust; now nine years later he watched over the body of a saint" (Slave, 227). He reflects on the strangeness of their relationship, the power of their passion and the love they bore for the Jewish God and for each other which led them to ignore the rest of the world and to live like Adam and Eve, alone, in the beginning.

A transgression might at times even lead to good. So, he, Jacob, had sinned when he had lusted for Wanda, but now Wanda had become Sarah, the daughter of Abraham, and in giving birth to a child was about to summon a Jewish soul from the Throne of Glory (Slave, 184).

Sexuality itself is inherent in all nature, but men are not animals. By granting a religious framework to his passion, by sanctifying it and making it a holy union between husband and wife, Jacob has transformed a sin into a sacred act.

His investigations of the cabala. . .had uncovered the doctrine that all lust was of divine origin. . . . Coupling was the universal act underlying everything; Torah, prayer, the Commandments, God's holy names themselves were mysterious unions of the male and female principles (Slave, 127).

The Jew wisely "does not tempt Evil by denying the body but harnesses it into the service of God" (Slave, 108). Herein lies the difference between the almost sacred mating of Jacob and Sarah and the unredeemed passion of the Lord and

Lady of Pilitz, Adam and Theresa Pilitzky. Adam Pilitzky is his lascivious wife's pimp and slave, while she is the servant of her indiscriminating lust: "She's had a stallion as her lover, and of course the coachman" (Slave, 240). Periodically Pilitzky and his wife engage in bouts of exaggerated "religious frenzy," hoping thereby to have heaven condone their obscene behavior (Slave, 142). While they speak loudly of Catholic mercy, Adam warns that "Poland would have no peace until all Protestants, Cossacks and Jews were killed" (Slave, 143). Animal sacrifices are a source of entertainment to this depraved couple, as are the humiliations and beatings they heap upon their aristocratic relatives who are literally servants in the Pilitzky household.

The irony of a pimp and his whore raised to the level of aristocracy and holding the lives of Jews in their blood-stained hands is extended by Singer into a subtle comparison between the shameless, publically fornicating pagans and the sinful Jews. The administrator of the Jews in Pilitz is the avaricious, corrupt Gershon who bears a great resemblance to the pagan priest, Dziobak. The Jews in Pilitz have become idolaters, too: money is their god, greed and envy their new religion. Instead of turning their eyes heavenward and seeking to improve themselves, Gershon's followers cringe and crawl like spiders, passive and weak in the face of attackers. When Lord Pilitzky, in one of

his senseless rages, threatens Gershon's life, all the Jews watch helplessly, immobile; only Jacob moves to save Gershon's life, an act which arouses Gershon's jealousy and fear rather than his gratitude. Jacob, against his will, becomes the new leader of the Jews, and Gershon's hatred reaches a new peak; he seeks endless ways to bring about Jacob's downfall. Observing these backbiting, slanderous, wicked Jews, the reader is compelled to understand, as Jacob did when watching the horrors of the unclean pagan world, the harshness of God's decrees: that "some forms of corruption can only be cleansed by fire" (Slave, 60).

Singer seems to be suggesting that the Jews themselves with their stubborn unrepentance, have perhaps angered God and thus, at least partially caused their own suffering. He simultaneously points out, however, that in Poland the Jews are the victims of an unreasoning hatred directed at them from a variety of groups--the peasants, the Christians, the Cossacks. Their evil--which is mostly self-destructive, harming only themselves--cannot finally compare to the vaster evils surrounding them. The Jews in Poland remain

A tortured people. A people whom God has
chosen for affliction, raining down on them
all the tortures in the Book of Punishment
(Slave, 224).

Betrayed by Sarah's speech during her labor and by Gershon's revelation to the Polish authorities that a Jew and a gentile were illegally married and had a child, Jacob

is arrested. Reminding himself of the courageous Biblical heroes and deciding to take his own life in his hands, Jacob escapes, breaking "the chain of slavery" once more (Slave, 234). Alone in the forest, fleeing his pursuers, he dreams of Sarah who comforts him and tells him to return to Pilitz for their son. Surrounded by danger, he goes back to get Benjamin, and miraculously, the two of them manage to leave Pilitz and Poland on their exodus to freedom--to Israel, the land of their ancestors.

Almost twenty years later, a white-bearded stranger enters Pilitz with an odd request: to visit a convert's grave. Unfortunately, no one can recall the whereabouts of Dumb Sarah's bones; at Gershon's order she was given a donkey's burial. When the man identifies himself as Jacob, the townspeople are amazed. Not only did he survive and escape to the Holy Land but his son, Benjamin, is now a lecturer in a yeshiva in Jerusalem, with three children of his own.

Sorrowfully, Jacob accepts the failure of his mission: "to disinter Sarah's bones and take them back" to Israel (Slave, 266). His sudden death in Pilitz and the subsequent miracle at his burial seem to offer proof that while "the will was free, . . . heaven also made its ordinances" (Slave, 229). As the gravedigger is preparing the ground for Jacob's grave, his spade strikes Sarah's bones.

The community had buried Sarah outside but the dead had gathered to take her in. The cemetery itself had ordained it; Sarah was a Jewish daughter and a sanctified corpse.

Pilitz was in an uproar. Women cried; the pious fasted. Many came, even young girls and children, for a look at the body that had lain twenty years in the earth and was still recognizable. The cemetery was as crowded as in the month of Elul when everyone visits the graves. It was like one of the ancient miracles, a sign that there is an Eye which sees and a scale wherein even the acts of the stranger are weighed. The elders called a meeting and decided to bury Jacob near Sarah.

Thus judgment was rendered (Slave, 286).

Thus man's law is superseded by God's judgment. Although in their lives they were forced to be separated, at least "in their death they were not divided" (Slave, 287). It is sometimes difficult to discern man's judgment from God's. According to Singer, "many of the misunderstandings of religion stem from. . .the failure to distinguish between God and man."⁶ Judaism refuses to recognize man as a deity, but in Pilitz and Josefov, the Jews had attempted to "fool" God by placating Him with petty offerings while ignoring His Commandments.

Man's obligations toward God was (sic) easy to perform. Didn't Gershon have two kitchens, one for milk and one for meat? Men like Gershon cheated, but they ate matzoth prepared according to the strictest requirements. They slandered their fellow men, but demanded meat doubly kosher. They envied, fought, hated their fellow Jews, yet still put on a second pair of phylacteries. . . (Slave, 230).

God's judgment is harsh, unexpected, inexplicable, yet often compassionate--as in the case of the final reunion of Jacob

and Sarah.

Jacob himself--is he a saint or a great sinner as he considers himself to be? To Gershon who condemns him, he is of course the embodiment of Evil, Satan himself--or perhaps the other extreme: Jacob appears so godlike, so far beyond the level of man, that he inspires fear in the unworthy. Gershon and the pagans hide their eyes from the brilliance of Jacob's goodness. He commands respect, even from animals and children. Sarah sees him on an earthier level: he is her mentor in faith, the man she loves and desires, and the cause of her estrangement from her past life. "Thank you, Jacob, for everything," she tells him when she is dying. "You are the cause of my death but I don't hold it against you. How is it your fault? You're a man" (Slave, 212). As for Jacob, he views himself as a sinner because he ceded to passion yet he knows he could not have done otherwise. In spite of himself, his courage and his independence lead him away from the crowd. He is what he is, without explanation, a man against the world. It is odd, he reflects, that in his case, "the normal order of things had been reversed. It was God who spoke in the simplest language while evil overflowed with learned quotations" (Slave, 41). His years of slavery and exile have taught him that prayer shawls and phylacteries, while helpful, are not essential in reaching God; a pure heart filled with faith is all one needs. Jacob has the nobility, the

simplicity and grandeur of an exiled king.

He had always been the same Jacob, in Zamosc, in Josefov, in the hamlet on the mountain, in Pilitz, in Jerusalem. . . . At times, Jacob accused himself of stubbornness and disobedience since the Torah itself said that one should accept the majority and follow the leaders of each generation. But even so, Jacob could not be other than he was. . . . For long periods he could remain silent, but when he spoke it was always the truth. He had made long journeys to repay half a piastre. He dared defy armed Arabs or Turks. He took the most difficult tasks upon himself, carried the paralyzed, cleansed the lice-infested sick. Men avoided him, but pious women considered him a saint, one of the thirty-six righteous men who are the pillars of the world (Slave, 274).

Sometimes he himself is "amazed at the burdens he required his body and his soul to carry" (Slave, 275). Yet he--like Gershon and the other men--judges himself without mercy. He possesses mercy only in regard to others. Upon his return to Pilitz, a villager confronts him with a recital of the sins committed by the community against Sarah after her death.

'They didn't even cleanse your wife's body properly, just threw her in a ditch in her clothes. I was there. I saw it. The beadle was about to recite Kaddish, but Gershon said no. They stole everything you had. The corpse was still lying on the floor, and they were stripping the room. . . .

'I forgave them a long time ago.'

'All right, you forgave. But has God? In Heaven everything's written down--from the biggest sin to the smallest' (Slave, 278).

The quality of mercy in The Slave is an intangible rarity possessed only by saints--and God. God's mercy is difficult to understand, even at times to perceive, but it is

clearly present in Jacob's miraculous odyssey from life to death.

"All is commandment," said one Jewish sage. Nature itself is a revelation of God's wonders. "Everything was alive, the earth, the sun, each stone. Not death, but suffering was the real enigma" (Slave, 258). Nowhere else in his writing does Singer succeed so beautifully in recreating his own version of the rich, throbbing world of the Bible. He has painted a holy landscape, a sky that seems to draw its piercing, haunting loveliness from the enigmatic, evocative Kabbalah.

. . . Jacob found no sadness anywhere but within himself. The summer night throbbed with joy; from all sides came music. Warm winds bore the smell of grain, fruit, and pine trees to him. Itself a cabalistic book, the night was crowded with sacred names and symbols--mystery upon mystery. In the distance where sky and earth merged, lightning flashed, but no thunder followed. The stars looked like letters of the alphabet, vowel points, notes of music. Sparks flickered above the bare furrows. The world was a parchment scrawled with words and song. Every now and then Jacob heard a murmur in his ear as if some unseen being was whispering to him. He was surrounded by powers, some good, some evil, some cruel, some merciful, but each with its own nature and its own task to perform. At times he heard laughter, at other times sighs. He tripped but his foot was guided to the ground. The struggle was going on without as well as within him (Slave, 184-5).

Jacob is the Jewish Odysseus wandering through a responsive, personal universe that seems to await his coming. . . or perhaps, the Jewish Prospero exploring his Tempest-like world filled with unearthly music, voices and sounds, and

where sorcery is in the air. The major difference is that Jacob is seeking God. His faith unites him with the Biblical patriarchs who walked the earth and spoke to the same God thousands of years ago. The Jews are a people of history for whom the present is rooted in the past and the past speaks of the eternal. "No man is ever alone in history; every man is history. That is what Jewish tradition teaches us."⁷ Thus Singer uses the Jewish calendar of holy days--each of which commemorates a historical event crucial to the destiny of the Jews--to anchor Jacob's story in time.

. . .the novel opens with Jacob a slave to Polish peasants who in turn are presented as seventeenth century Egyptians. Although he tries to remain pious, Jacob lusts after Wanda, the daughter of his overseer and finally seduces her at the holiest time of the year--Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Significantly, Jacob is ransomed from slavery just before Passover (which commemorates the release from Egyptian slavery). Later he returns to Wanda or, as he puts it, to the Egyptian bondage of lust during the month of Av which includes the fast day of Tishav Be'Av to lament the destruction of the temple. His son is born just before Yom Kippur and he steals him away before Succoth which marks the birthday of the Torah, in order to flee to Palestine which marks the birthplace of the Torah. Finally, the novel concludes with Jacob returning and dying in the month of Av. In other words, in the same month that he went in search of Wanda, he is reunited with Wanda-Sarah. In the midst of a time set aside to lament the destruction of the temple, the 'miracle' of his being buried next to his wife brings the Jewish calendar which has governed the entire novel to its most affirmative climax and coincidence.⁸

As the history of the Jews underlines his history, Jacob's story echoes that of his namesake in the Bible: his two wives, the longing for Rachel, his overseer's daughter, a son born of sorrow. "Everything remained the same: the ancient love, the ancient grief" (Slave, 258). The Slave, Singer's masterpiece, both contemporary and timeless, gives us insight into thousands of years of Jewish existence.

"Perhaps the essential message of Judaism is that in doing the finite we may perceive the infinite."⁹ The Jew, through observance of his holy days and the ritualization of acts such as eating and drinking which would otherwise be performed thoughtlessly, without thanks to God, consecrates ordinary day-to-day activities. The Sabbath, for example, the day of rest, is a taste of eternity in everyday. Faith is the tree of life that leads into immortality. Jacob's worship of God allows him to perceive what is usually visible only to the inner eye: "Infinite worlds, angels, seraphim, mansions and sacred chariots surrounded man, but he did not see them because he was small and sinful and immersed in the vanities of the body" (Slave, 63). The Kabbalistic secret of expanding one's consciousness in order to grow aware of the different realities and levels of existence lies in faith. Man is not alone when he has his faith. Jacob has the past behind him: his Biblical forefathers, the patriarchs, and the learning and lore of generations of Jewish thought and history, to support him

and give him strength to withstand the bitterness of life in exile. And above and before him is God. "Jacob lifted his gaze: Lead, God, lead. It is thy world" (Slave, 259).

"God is eternally in Genesis," writes Singer; "God's novel" is constantly in the process of being rewritten (Man, 137, 138). The universe is ruled by a creative God who is always in the beginning, who is eternally transforming chaos into order. A Jewish daily prayer emphasizes the ceaseless re-creation of the universe: "Who in His goodness each day continually renews the work of the beginning." The Slave shows us that man must echo God by perpetually renewing himself; he has nature as his teacher to instruct him in how to remain rooted in eternity while freeing himself of the prison of his own personal past. According to the Besht, the founder of Hasidism, man should believe that each day the world is re-created, and each morning he is reborn. The legendary Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav extends this principle by insisting that every man should declare at all times, "The world was created for my sake." In Singer's world, man is not an indifferent spectator to an absurd cosmic drama; he is a member of the chorus, or a protagonist, a creator and prime mover in his own right. Each man is responsible for fulfilling his purpose on earth, to seek and find

a way for man to attain all possible pleasures,
all the powers and knowledge that nature can

grant him, and still serve God--a God who speaks in deeds, not in words, and whose vocabulary is the universe (Nobel, 5).

The true believer has the strength to be submissive, the humility that leads one to serve God in one's own way--by being oneself, as Jacob is, and no one else: this is freedom within slavery. Man's tragedy, however, is that

unlike the sun, the son of man never renews himself; that is why he is doomed to death. Man has memories, regrets, resentments. They collect like dust, they block him up so he can't receive the light and life that descends from heaven. But God's creation is constantly renewing itself. If the sky becomes cloudy, it clears up again. The sun sets, but is reborn every morning. There is no blemish of the past on the moon or stars. The ceaselessness of nature's creation is never so obvious as at dawn. Dew is falling, the birds twitter, the river catches fire, the grass is moist and fresh. Happy is the man who can renew himself together with creation 'when all the stars of morning sing together' (Friday, 251-2).

The wise man, like Jacob, adapts himself to the regularity and repetition of nature--rhythmic, harmonious and ever-changing. To breathe in the fresh morning air, to awaken as the birds do--with a song, to pause in wonder at the eternity of the moment and to thank God for the gift of life: this is Jacob's living faith. For him prayer itself is a means of re-creation.

Let there be day, let the sun rise, he commanded imploringly, realizing that his ambiguous words meant also: Let the Redemption come, and there be an end to this dark exile. It was safer to keep quiet, but instead he recited aloud passages of the Psalms, the Prophets, the Book of Prayer, and cried out to God: I have reached the end of the road. The waters are swirling around me. I

lack the strength to endure these afflictions. Suddenly he had a desire to sing and he chanted a Yom Kippur melody which turned midway into one of the mountain songs. . . .

All at once, a strange light flooded the forest, and for a second Jacob thought Heaven had heard him. All the birds began to scream and sing at once: the trunks of the pine trees seemed aflame. Far off in a clearing between the trees he saw a conflagration. A moment later, he realized it was the sun (Slave, 257).

Every man who is alive to the sense of wonder re-creates his faith. Like Jacob, he traverses the tightrope between belief and doubt, lust and prayer, in an attempt to abolish the barrier between the sacred and the profane. Striving to comprehend the reason for the suffering of all living creatures, he poses himself as an adversary to God, wrestling with Him as the Biblical Jacob did with His angel. At the end of his Exodus to faith, he may find himself, like Jacob, one of the chosen to share his existence with God, or like Singer, in Exile, with the bittersweet task of spinning tales as a method of Jewish survival. Singer's tales provide a means of keeping the Jewish dream alive, of building up the mythology of the Jews, thereby giving them pride in their heritage. He is merely following in the tradition of the "people of the book" who have always regarded the story as teacher--from the Torah itself to the Hasidic legends. The enchantment, magic and morality of storytelling which relates symbols and mysteries to everyday Judaism help counteract the loss of faith in today's lonely, meaningless, de-centered universe. As Rabbi Nachman the

Bratzlaver told his followers, it is not true that stories help people fall asleep; on the contrary, stories help people who sleep away their lives without knowing it to awaken and grow aware of the deeper realities of faith and destiny. "I am not ashamed to admit," said Singer in his Nobel lecture,

'that I belong to those who fantasize that literature is capable of bringing new horizons and new perspectives--philosophical, religious, aesthetical, and even social. In the history of old Jewish literature there was never any basic difference between the poet and the prophet. Our ancient poetry often became law and a way of life' (Nobel, 5).

The tree of life itself is Singer's metaphor for the living faith as it is reborn in his writing. After winter comes the spring with its lush re-creation of nature; although the tree of life is constantly in the process of being destroyed, it is as constantly in the process of being renewed--either through the miracle of faith or the art of literature.

The leaves drop from the tree, but the branches remain; the trunk still has its roots. Israel's lost children live in every land (Slave, 268).

Like the phoenix the house of Israel rises from its ashes.

NOTES

¹Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York, 1976), p. 32.

²Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Future of Yiddish and Yiddish Literature," in The Jewish Book Annual, v. 25 (New York, 1967), pp. 72-3.

³Heinrich Heine, "Israel Among the Nations," in The Wisdom of Israel, ed. Lewis Browne (New York, 1945), p. 615.

⁴Rabbi Bunam quoted in Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters (New York, 1948), p. 256.

⁵Abraham Joshua Heschel, Between God and Man; ed. Fritz A. Rothschild (New York, 1959), p. 148.

⁶Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York, 1969), p. 12.

⁷Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God, p. 63.

⁸Irving H. Buchen, Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past (New York, 1968), pp. 52-53.

⁹A. J. Heschel, Between God and Man, p. 146.

Chapter II

A JEW IS A JEW IS A JEW

We are the mighty!
The last generation of slaves
and the first generation
of freemen!

--Bialik
from "The Dead of
the Wilderness"

One of Singer's major concerns is the climactic moment when the naïve, unworldly Hasidim entered the brilliant modern world, blinking as they emerged after thousands of years of segregation in their dark ghettos. The tragic Jewish destiny, however, did not allow them their day in the sun. The virulent anti-Semitism that pursued them and violently overtook them in the Holocaust left not even their shadows behind. What happened to destroy the lives of the hopeful Jews? Singer examines this question at great length in several of his works, most notably in The Family Moskat and The Manor and The Estate (the latter two together form one long novel), declaring that the solution is to be found in that moment of emergence when curious eyes watched the emancipation of the Jews and their attempts to integrate themselves into modern society. He feels that "the modern Jew, his becoming a modern Jew, deserves a lot of attention because the enlightenment is a

great event that happened after two thousand years of living according to tradition."¹ His use of social realism, and even naturalism, to depict the lives of a gallery of vivid characters in these two novels, as opposed to his luminous, mystical style that focuses primarily on one character, as in The Slave and The Magician of Lublin, demonstrates his versatility as an author. He traces the identity of the Jews through this difficult period of transition into the twentieth century by following the fortunes and misfortunes of a vast cross-section of Polish Jewry.

In these two novels, Singer examines the dilemma of the Polish Jews who lived in the time between Chmielnicki's massacres and the Nazi Holocaust: in particular, their passionate pursuit of freedom which unfortunately entangled them in new forms of slavery. Jacob, in The Slave, as the servant of God, has his faith which provides him with the courage to withstand persecution and hardships. But the modern Jews of the twentieth century, according to Singer, are living rootlessly; having rejected their past traditions and their God, they attempt to live "freely, without bearing the burden of generations" (Estate, 22). He compares their "illusions" and "vain hopes. . .to the people who believed in Sabbatai Zevi, they were just as honest in their own way, just as zealous, and just as disappointed."² Throughout his novels and tales, Singer demonstrates the fallacy of believing in freedom while substituting man-made idols for

God. Most of his characters are ultimately forced to admit that there is no such thing as freedom for man; freedom can only exist within the context of slavery to a higher ideal, one beyond man's reach, as exemplified by Jacob's slavery to God. They also discover, as Rabbi Nechemia from Bechev does, in the short story, "Something is There," from Singer's collection, A Friend of Kafka, that there are no heretics: everyone worships his own idol. The rabbi learns that those who spout the most slogans in the name of freedom are ironically those who are the most committed to their particular brand of slavery.

The fall of the Hasidic court of Bechev parallels Rabbi Nechemia's own loss of faith. The Bechev Hasidim have moved on to richer, livelier courts, leaving it virtually deserted. His own brother, Simcha David, a heretic, has moved to Warsaw and his sister, Hinde Shevach, is an abandoned wife who reads in her room all day. Alone, Rabbi Nechemia attempts to rebuild the court, but finds he cannot, his heart is not in the work: a great "wrath against the Creator" has filled his soul (Kafka, 283). He can no longer sleep; horrifying visions of atrocities committed against the Jews ruin his nights. He debates with God, but receives no answer for the ultimate question: "why the suffering?" (Kafka, 285) Neither God nor his holy books provide him with either solace or a solution to the eternal problem--that has never ceased tormenting Singer--of human

suffering. Overwhelmed with rage at his impotence, Rabbi Nechemia turns away abruptly from God one day, declaring bitterly that "to a silent torturer one does not speak, and to a persecutor one does not pray" (Kafka, 288).

He stops praying, exchanges his traditional Hasidic garments for modern clothes and leaves Bechev for Warsaw, hoping to find his brother, Simcha David. Unburdened and free, ready to follow in the heretics' footsteps, the young rabbi feels "a surge of defiance, the courage and the relief of one who had rid himself of all yokes" (Kafka, 290). His illusion of freedom brusquely disappears, however, in the deafening, bewildering chaos of the large city. Poverty, prostitution and crime meet his eyes wherever he looks. Simcha David, cold and unfriendly, is "no longer the prodigy of Bechev but a shabby laborer" (Kafka, 295). Glancing through Zionist pamphlets in his brother's room, the rabbi is shocked by the extent of faith possessed by these alleged revolutionaries who paradoxically chant about generations of Jews to be born and raised in Israel, a Jewish state. "If there's no Creator, why go to the Holy Land?" Rabbi Nechemia wonders logically (Kafka, 296). And "if you didn't believe in God, why raise children, why support wives?" (Kafka, 297) The incongruity and absurdity of the pamphlets disturbs the rabbi.

It seemed that the world was full of faith. If you didn't believe in one God, you must believe in another. . . . But where were the real

heretics, those who believed in nothing? He had not come to Warsaw to barter one faith for another (Kafka, 296).

The rabbi spends three desolate, disappointing weeks in the city. His quest for a real heretic has been in vain: there are none. Even the book he discovers, How the Universe Came into Being, has only exchanged one faith for another: faith in evolution replaces faith in God. Books are filled with lies that cover up their authors' lack of knowledge, he decides: "All books had one thing in common: they avoided the essential, spoke vaguely, and gave different names to the same object" (Kafka, 308). Worldly knowledge in all its manifestations disillusioned him until one day, in the midst of his despair, he encounters a kind, generous coal dealer who tells him simply, as they are seated in a tavern, "Something is there. Who made the world?" (Kafka, 304)

Understanding that there is no more for him to learn in Warsaw, the rabbi, a weak, broken man, returns to Bechev. His sister confronts him, demanding that he explain the reason for his mysterious departure.

"I wanted to know what the heretics say."

"What do they say?"

"There are no heretics."

"Is that so?"

"The whole world worships idols," the rabbi muttered.

"They invent gods and serve them."

"The Jews also?"

"Everybody" (Kafka, 310-311).

Rabbi Nechemia's condemnation of modern civilization as a

regression to forms of slavery and idolatry masking themselves as freedom is echoed by Singer in all his novels. Why, wonders the frail, dying rabbi, should man worship at the feet of a dead, inanimate or man-made structure when he can delight in the worship of an immortal, infinite, omnipotent God? Rabbi Nechemia dies, but not before admitting that "something is there," thereby ending his war with God.

The downfall of Hasidism itself, as personified by the rabbi of Bechev and his dwindling court, was largely due to the growing number of heretical Jews--like Simcha David--who left the refuge of tradition it offered for the thrill and lure of assimilation into sophisticated modern culture. The move--both symbolic and literal--from shtetl to city is chronicled in both The Family Moskat and The Manor and The Estate. The two young protagonists, Asa Heshel Bannet of The Family Moskat and Ezriel Babad of The Manor and The Estate leave Tereshpol Minor and Jampol, respectively, to seek a new way of life in Warsaw. The past they reject is steeped in eternity, rich and resonant with thousands of years of spiritual grandeur allied to physical torture. The Hasidic Jews lived according to a subjective calendar, dividing their lives "into two endless days, the Biblical yesterday and the exile of today."³ The future was reserved for the glorious coming of the Messiah which would end the suffering of all Jews, allowing them to find joy and peace

at last, in Israel. Dreams of the Messianic Era were so deeply ingrained in the hearts and souls of Jews in the Diaspora that it was not at all out of the ordinary for a child, feverish with anticipation of the wonderful days to come, to imagine his own cozy, familial version: "My brother Moshe and I," recalls Singer, "would enter the palace where King David sat with crown on head on a golden throne and call him 'Grandpa!'" (Boy, 3) The future symbolized hope for the Jews, the fulfillment of their communal dream, the dawn after the long night of exile.

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogenous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance--namely in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.⁴

Menahem-Mendl of Vitebsk was typical of the impatient, wistful Hasidim. "Mornings he would go to the window, look outside and sadly remark: 'He has not yet come, for the world is still the same.'"⁵ Centuries of suffering and exile gave birth to the Jewish concept of time.

Both Ezriel Babad of The Manor and The Estate and Asa Heshel Bannet of The Family Moskat come from generations of pious, rabbinical Hasidic families--as does Singer himself.

Estranged, yet unable to divorce themselves totally from their pasts, both rooted and alienated in the Hasidic culture, Asa Heshel and Ezriel echo Singer's uniquely modern perspective into this world that is now gone. This paradoxical attitude of "distant familiarity" is crucial to the art of writing as well. According to Singer, a writer

has to be deeply rooted and also, in a way alienated. He has to know the object of his writing so he has to be deeply rooted, but at the same time, he cannot be too much one of the people. . . . In other words, he has to be, according to my ideas, very much of a relative and very much of a stranger.

Only an author who was raised in a Hasidic environment and later experienced the varieties of secular, worldly sensations could penetrate the enigma of Hasidism. The Hasidim with their blend of primitive vitality and other-worldly innocence invite misunderstanding and mockery from the Poles and the rest of the modern world. As Lucy Davidowicz points out in The Golden Tradition,

Hasidism directed itself toward improving the inner man; *haskala*, the outer man. Hasidism wanted to perfect man for communion with God; *haskala* wanted to refine and cultivate him for communication with non-Jews.

Haskala, the Jewish Enlightenment, embraced all that modern society offered. It stressed superficial appearance--clothes, manners, shorn sidelocks, and so on--that would please the gentiles, thereby permitting the Jews free access into their culture. Hasidism, on the other hand, calling for a total abandonment to God in fervent, often

incomprehensible or seemingly ridiculous forms of worship, necessarily ignored the unclean horrors of a shallow world. Ezriel, watching the noisy, childlike Hasidim at a train station, is overcome with self-contempt, realizing that their excessive exuberance and loud gesticulations have made him "ashamed of the Jews! This was what the Enlightenment had led to!" (Estate, 357)

The train arrived. The Hassidim pushed forward with their packs and satchels. Ezriel watched them. They were almost all small, disheveled, with stooped shoulders, ruffled beards, and spoke with outlandish gestures. During the train's long wait, they shouted, ran about from one car to the next, became entangled in their long capotes, behaved so boisterously that the Gentile passengers laughed at them. Ezriel heard one Pole say to another: 'A wild rabble, eh? . . . ' Yes, here they were a rabble, but, only an hour before, they had been priests in a temple. Would the world ever understand this? They were completely lacking in that ornament the Gentile world called dignity or pride. Everything fine in them was concealed. Externally, they were almost caricatures (Estate, 357).

Caring nothing about their outward appearances, the Hasidim were doomed to be mocked and even reviled by those who judged them only superficially. Even today the remaining sects of Hasidism in Israel and America continue to worship God in the same ecstatic, self-forgetful ways (Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk, for example, was so overcome with emotion and joy while worshiping God that he turned somersaults while praying) that both awe and repel their opponents. A contemporary American reformed rabbi, witnessing a Hasidic wedding in Israel during which the Hasidim

silently played wooden dummy instruments (a curious ritual for which he could find neither precedent nor explanation, but which seems to serve as a particularly apt metaphor for the cryptic Hasidim) comments, "Hasidism is Judaism with its most childlike, dreamlike and fantastic elements acted out in a kind of pantomime--like a silent orchestra playing music that only the heart can hear."⁸ Oddly enough, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, employed a similar example to illustrate the enigma of faith in his well-known parable.

Once some musicians stood and played, and a great group moved in dance in accordance with the voices of the music. Then a deaf man came there who knew nothing of dancing and music and thought in his heart, 'How foolish these men are: some beat with their fingers on all kinds of implements, and others turn themselves this way and that.'⁹

The rest of the world is like the deaf man in regard to the Hasidim.

The spiritual and physical isolation of the Jews both helped to continue the Jewish culture during the exile and contributed to their worldly innocence. The Polish gentiles--and many of the young, "enlightened" Jews--had nothing but contempt for this people who had spent thousands of years codifying and adding to their tradition while Europe was involved in constant upheavals, wars and furthering technology. "This segregation," writes Singer, "is as old as Jewish exile itself and has maintained the Jew through two thousand years of his existence in the

Diaspora" (Hasidim, 13). But at the end of the nineteenth century, a volatile drama ensues as the haskala demolishes the gates of the shtetls and ghettos and the Jews come rushing out onto the stage of the modern world. Without their isolation to help them maintain their rigid, collective identity as the house of Israel, the Jews attempt to merge with the rest of humanity and to become merely people.

In The Manor and The Estate, Calman Jacoby symbolizes old Jewry, those who follow the way of tradition, and Ezriel, the doubting new generation. The detached narrator sympathizes with both sides, and therefore, draws no definite conclusions. Faith--Judaism itself--is on trial in The Manor and The Estate, and although Singer finds it to be lacking in many respects, it seems to offer the only hope for man to lift himself above his bestial, violent nature. As Mary Ellman writes, in her essay, "The Piety of Things in The Manor," "The central character is Jewry rather than Calman Jacoby."¹⁰ I would modify that statement to read Jewry rather than Ezriel Babad, because as we shall see, although Calman Jacoby's life and children provide the structural frame of the novel, Ezriel gives it its life. All questions in The Manor and The Estate finally revolve around Ezriel and his return to faith.

The Manor, which appeared in English in 1967 (The Estate, in 1969), takes place in the "epoch between the Polish insurrection of 1863 and the end of the nineteenth century" (Manor, Author's Note). The roots of "socialism and nationalism, Zionism and assimilationism, nihilism and anarchism, suffragettism, atheism, the weakening of the family bond, free love, and even the beginnngs of Facism"--all the modern forms of slavery and "false messianism" that disgusted Rabbi Nechemia of Bechev--are explored through a great variety of characters (Manor, Author's Note). Together The Manor and The Estate form a strong, compassionate book filled with wisdom, humor, insight and a moving accusation/defense of Judaism--and more particularly, of Hasidism. The Manor opens in Jampol with Calman Jacoby, a wealthy, religious Jew, and his four daughters, each of whose destinies marks the various directions the novel will follow. Jochebed, the eldest, is traditional and dull. Her marriage to Mayer Joel, a pompous rabbi's son, results in a shared, smug harmony that persists unchallenged by either questions or doubts.

Shaindel, the second daughter, marries another rabbi's son, Ezriel Babad, who is considered a near-heretic, a stranger to his faith. From a vivacious "gypsy," Shaindel degenerates into a madwoman and dies in an insane asylum. Part-traditional Jewish daughter and part-adventurous, modern young woman, Shaindel is a victim of the

confrontation between the old ways and the new world: the new tramples the old without a backward glance. With cruel irony, Ezriel becomes a psychiatrist, leaving his mad, unfashionable wife behind: her life ends as his begins.

Miriam Liebe, the third daughter, suffers perhaps the most tragic fate. A romantic girl, wishing to escape the pain inherent in Jewish existence, she elopes with Count Lucian Jampolski, a handsome, devilish child-man whose own insanity will prove her ruin. Having abandoned her faith, her parents and her past, she embodies Singer's precept that those who flee suffer because by putting "romantic love" first, above all other considerations and sacrificing eternity for momentary lust, they merely live for the present, thereby leaving no "estate," nothing to save their descendants from the meaninglessness of a rootless, tradition-less life. Count Lucian is indifferent to human life--he murders a man and later commits suicide. "I have but one ambition: to live in the present," he cries. "After I die, they can throw me to the dogs" (Manor, 138). He soon deserts Miriam Liebe, leaving her to drink herself into oblivion--which is mercilessly denied her.

Count Lucian's nihilistic sadism forms a sharp contrast to the saintly Rabbi Jochanan of Marshinov who weds Calman Jacoby's youngest daughter, Tsipele. Warm-hearted and charitable, Tsipele is given as wife to the pimply adolescent, Jochanan, when she is still a child. Contrary

to all expectations, their relationship flourishes; it is the most perfect in the book, a union of faith and mercy. She is a pious, holy woman, and he is as humble as he is saintly.

He was a mass of faults, but he did have one virtue: he loved the Jews. The sight of beards and sidelocks filled him with joy. Only embarrassment kept him from kissing every Jew he met. His love for his people was apparently a gift from God (Manor, 343).

He is virtually alone in his love for the Jews in The Manor and The Estate, where anti-Semitism and loathing are the rule. His death is the omen of the end of an era, that of the great Hasidic courts and the wise Tzaddikim who reigned over them; one foresees no successor for Jochanan, the rabbi of Marshinov--or indeed for Rabbi Nechemia of Bechev either.

Calman Jacoby himself, after his first wife's death, in a brief, tragic foray into the modern world, marries the vulgar, faithless Clara who leaves him soon after for a student who later abandons her. Their mismatched union unsurprisingly results in the birth of a "monstrous child," who is appropriately called Ishmael, the savage. Nicknamed Sasha, he is from his earliest moments as cruel, sadistic and dangerous as Lucian, if not more. This bitter herald of a godless future is Calman's only "consolation" in his old age. Miserable, Calman is left alone--all his children gone (Tsipele too far away to really help), one wife dead,

another wife better forgotten, only Sasha ominously, intermittently present--to ponder his fate. Solely his reflections on the continuity of the Jewish faith in history, the sense of eternity it evokes, can restore Calman's serenity once more.

The Hebrew letters were steeped in holiness, in eternity. They seemed to unite him with the patriarchs, with Joshua, Jamaliel, Eliezer, and with Hillel the Ancient. The tannaim spoke to him like grandfathers. They argued with him as to what was right and what was wrong, what was pure and impure. They made him a kind of partner in sharing the Torah's treasures. Among these shelves of sacred books, Calman felt protected. Over each volume hovered the soul of its author. In this place, God watched over him (Manor, 442)

Although skeptical, Ezriel, too, is ready to grant that "when one gazes at the Talmudic scholars, one actually sees eternity," but he cannot find tranquillity within traditional Judaism which seems both inconsistent and illogical to him (Estate, 364). Dissociating himself from his past, Ezriel moves to Warsaw, ostensibly to study at the university but more and more to observe modern society. Asa Heshel, in The Family Moskat, makes a similar move, from his provincial town, where he was regarded as the heretical grandson of a celebrated holy man, Reb Dan Katzenellenbogen, to Warsaw. Judaism is on trial in both novels; modern Jews wish to divorce themselves from their antiquated, pogrom-ridden pasts. But the modern world is also on trial, being judged by these people who, in a manner of speaking, have

leaped across two thousand years of world history and have just arrived in the twentieth century. Asa Heshel's experience with modern society parallels Ezriel's: they are both first impressed by it and try to follow its complicated ways. Upon acquiring a mistress, Olga Rielikov, a converted woman who coldly distances herself from her Jewish roots, Ezriel reaches the apex of his foolish emulation of gentile behavior and the beginning of his downfall in society: "I'm a doctor," he reflects. "I am carrying on an affair. What could be more European than that? I've gone pretty far since Jampol" (Manor, 415). Asa Heshel also drifts back and forth in a vapid, deadly search for pleasure. His life, like Ezriel's, is "filled with purposeless brooding, fantasies, unquenched passions" (Moskat, 561). Asa Heshel destroys love and lives in a senseless journey from woman to woman, never realizing how much tragedy he inflicts upon those who have the misfortune to believe in him.

But he is not all to blame. Asa Heshel, like Ezriel, has a redeeming quality which is missing in most of his contemporaries who are content to sway with the masses. After having pierced through the false, glittering veneer of modern civilization, he and Ezriel both try to live according to their own truths, without lying to themselves. They are cynics and pessimists, but they cannot compromise with falsehood and hypocrisy. Asa Heshel is lacking something, however, that would make him a complete person.

Ezriel ultimately resurfaces in the Jewish tradition, extending it in his own direction; but Asa Heshel simply fades away, passively awaiting Hitler's coming with his people. He is a hollow man, one for whom even love fails to provide an anchor, a center for his life. He

reflected that it was not yet too late to end the adventure he was having with Barbara. But his existence was too gray, he simply had to find something to hang on to. Among the extinguished souls with whom he was surrounded it was impossible to breathe (Moskat, 539).

The problem of identity is a crucial one for these uncertain, drifting Jews. They wish to free themselves from the yoke of the past, but upon having rejected it, they find they have nothing to fall back on. As Edward Alexander points out, in his book about Singer,

A Frenchman who rejected his father's religion and dress and manners would still remain, however transformed or diminished, a Frenchman --living on French soil, speaking the French language, even continuing, in secularized mode, the customs which for his parents were explicitly religious.

For the Jews of Europe, however, the loss of unity in religion meant the loss of Jewish identity itself. There were not a thousand ways of being Jewish, only one.¹¹

It is the tragedy of modern man, of course--painted by everyone from Sartre to Nabokov: an emptiness, a void that needs to be filled--but it is the modern man with an added dimension; it is the portrait of a modern Jew. Adrift in a world they do not really understand and in which, deny it as they may, they are neither welcomed nor often, even

tolerated, the Jews of Ezriel's and Asa Heshel's generation do not know which way to turn. Most of them ape the gentiles by joining one of the "isms" described in The Manor, that is currently in fashion, not realizing that they have merely exchanged one form of slavery for another, less noble, more demeaning one.

In Irving Buchen's words,

The Jews at the beginning of The Family Moskat are recognizable as Jews. Those at the end of the novel are merely individuals who happen to be Jewish. . . . The Family Moskat is a Jewish novel in the process of becoming a modern novel.¹²

The Family Moskat was Singer's first novel to appear in English, in 1950. Although it was written earlier than The Manor and The Estate, it takes place later in time, focusing on the years 1911 to 1939. Singer describes the confrontation between the old world and the new at this particularly critical time for Jews: their tradition is weakening, their people are dispersing, the legendary wonder and awe of Hasidism have grown facile and forced-- and their identity is disappearing. He objectively traces the fortunes of the Moskat tribe for three generations-- from the last days of Meshulam Moskat, their founder and patriarch, when "they were all cut from the same cloth" to long after his death, when they are as various and difficult to sort as "the animals and fowl of Noah's ark" (Moskat, 566). Asa Heshel comes to the Moskat family via a

brief marriage to the sharp, brittle Adele, old Meshulam's step-daughter, and a subsequent marriage to the soft, dreamy Hadassah, Meshulam's grand-daughter.

It is evident that the house of Moskat is disintegrating even before Hitler's bombs will level it to the ground. Hitler himself is off-stage in The Family Moskat, but his shadow already looms over Warsaw: the characters are aware, although many refuse to admit it, that "the Nazi wolf was howling at Poland's door" (Moskat, 557). We witness the gradual destruction of an entire civilization--the Polish-Jewish community before World War II. Singer, however, refuses to allow the reader to view all the potential victims as martyrs--Jews, like all people, are both good and evil, strong and weak: many of them, it is clear, caused their own misery--especially those who wholeheartedly embraced "isms" like Communism and Social Bundism, sadly unaware that "every 'ism' spelled doom for them" (Estate, 349).

The problem that Singer perceives with assimilation and the revolutionary "isms"--echoed by Asa Heshel's and Ezriel's refusal to identify themselves with any movement whatsoever--is the reality which most Jews prefer to ignore: that they are in fact regarded differently from the rest of the people. Barbara, Asa Heshel's last girlfriend, is a Marxist, a converted Jewess. She believes passionately in "the movement," using their slogans to camouflage the emptiness and

lack of thought in her words. "What does your Jewishness really consist in?" she asks Asa Heshel. "What are the Jews after all?" He replies,

'A people who can't sleep themselves and let nobody else.'
 'Maybe that comes from a bad conscience.'
 'The others have no conscience at all.'
 'I must give you credit for one virtue: you're a consistent reactionary. I guess that's really why I like you. Socialism will wipe it all away--chauvinism, poverty, middle-class philosophy. In a certain sense people like you are useful. You help dig the grave for capitalism (my underlinings, Moskat, 527).'

In The Manor, Ezriel's sister, Mirale, argues with her brother in the same vein when he dares to mention the Jews during a revolutionary meeting in her apartment. Parasites of society should be killed, she announces, and "a parasite is a parasite, even if he's your father" (Manor, 329). Shocked, Ezriel observes the females in the revolutionary group.

'Why are they all so bloodthirsty?' Ezriel wondered. They were Jewish women, members of the race which had sworn to uphold the Ten Commandments. Mirale was only one generation removed from their father and mother. Only a short time before, she had been reading their mother's prayer book. . . . Now he spent his time cutting the dead apart, and Mirale plotted to kill the living (Manor, 330).

"People have been fighting for thousands of years," Ezriel informs the group. "What have all those battles produced?" Their spokesman, Zipkin, retorts "Civilization. Our modern world, with all its virtues and faults. Mankind has moved

forward, not backward" (Manor, 330-331). Ezriel remains silent while the revolutionaries applaud Zipkin. Asa Heshel and Ezriel, confused as they are, can at least see the futility of these revolutionary "isms" clearly enough. Asa Heshel tells Barbara, "I have a feeling that all of humanity is caught in a trap. No going forward and no going backward. We Jews will be the first victims" (Moskat, 526).

It is easy, of course, in retrospect to see the absurdity of a Barbara or a Mirale or a Zipkin who, with the other revolutionaries, are busy placating their leaders with plans to liquidate all "useless" members of society while Hitler is approaching, drawing closer every second. Preaching louder than the others the glories of whichever "ism" the crowd is shouting about, they become strangely indifferent to the sanctity of human life, ready to sacrifice everything and everyone they once held dear to the CAUSE--until, without warning, the revolutionaries turn on their Jewish "comrades," massacring them, indulging in pogroms, tortures and other gruesome pastimes: all in the precious name of freedom. The Jews--like Barbara, Mirale and Zipkin--who succumbed to the noble ideals and catchy slogans of the movements turned on their pasts with a vengeance, attempting to scorch and revile them out of existence. Their reward: the world's contempt, and their families' and their own extermination--a reward, of course, not confined

merely to the Jewish revolutionaries. Thus an irony comes to light--one rendered almost trite by the Holocaust yet which still retains its bite: live as $\frac{1}{2}$ -Jews or even $\frac{1}{4}$ -Jews, but die as full Jews. It seems an almost singsong revenge on those who attempt to deny what they are.

These cut-throat, deadly alternatives to inner emptiness are exposed for what they really are: excuses for men to kill each other, thereby confirming Singer's view of the world as "one great slaughterhouse, one enormous hell" (Boy, 49). Instead of being proud of their faith and teaching the modern world how to "lead sanctified lives, without wars, without adultery, without mockery or rebellion," the desperate Jews, having denied their pasts and having tried in vain to assimilate, find themselves tottering, neither Jew nor gentile, on artificial, withering roots (Estate, 349). As Ezriel discovers after he leaves Poland,

the person who estranges himself from God seeks only an opportunity to hate. We hate in the name of patriotism, or class distinctions, party relationships, or simply because we live in different localities, or speak a different dialect. . . . Europe is full of plans, but all of them demand human sacrifice (Estate, 363).

Hatred fills the modern world, and much of it is directed to the scapegoats: the Jews. Only one "ism" seems to offer hope for them: Zionism. As we shall see in Chapter V, Singer views it, too, with skepticism, although he grants it much more respect than he does any other movement. Ahad Ha-am, one of Zionism's brilliant pioneers, glories in the

dream of the creation of a Jewish state because it "will give to our Judaism a national content which will be genuine and natural, unlike the substitutes with which we try to fill the void."¹³ The precariousness of their situation becomes woefully evident as the Jews try to mingle with other peoples. Why they don't even have a village of their own, sneers a lofty Voltaire from his Dictionnaire Philosophique; so much, then, for the chosen people and their covenant with God. "We Jews," explains the cynical Abram Shapiro, in The Family Moskat, "are building on sand. We live in air" (Moskat, 145).

The last Passover meal the Moskat family share is a sad one, ominous, disturbing. Dispersed and weakened, they stare at each other numbly, wondering what horrors lie in store for them.

Yes, every generation has its Pharaohs and Hamans and Chmielnickis. Now it was Hitler. Would a miracle happen this time, too? In a year from now would Jews be able again to sit down and observe the Passover? Or God forbid, would the new Haman finish them off? (Moskat, 577).

The once-powerful tribe of Moskats scatters like mice to the sounds of war and machine guns heralding Hitler's arrival. Asa Heshel decides at the last minute to remain with the family rather than run away with Barbara. Fatalistic, he sees no hope for the Jews--either in Poland or elsewhere. His friend, Hertz Yanovar, meets him on the street and bursts into tears. "The Messiah will come soon,"

he tells Asa Heshel.

Asa Heshel looked at him in astonishment.
 'What do you mean?'
 'Death is the Messiah. That's the real truth.'
 (Moskat, 608)

On this discordant, startling note the novel ends. The reader has moved with the Jews through time: from the collective identity of the house of Israel when Jews still shared an identity--eternally, passively awaiting their Messiah--to the disillusionment that arose from following the "false messiahs" of the modern world. In Shosha, Singer writes, "From the day they were exiled from their land, Jews had lived in anticipation of death or the coming of the Messiah" (Shosha, 239). When death itself becomes the Messiah, we know that we are dealing with a people who have lost all hope, all faith in the future. Struggling survivors, struggling through time, alone without their God, they await death in the darkness before the dawn of Israel.¹⁴

The Estate concludes on a brighter note with Ezriel's return to faith. After a series of misfortunes crowd his life--his wife, Shaindel, dies in an insane asylum; his sister, Mirale, is exiled to Siberia; his mistress, Olga, leaves him for a prosperous landowner; his older son, Joziek, leaves Poland to become a settler in Palestine; his daughter, Zina, becomes a gun-bearing revolutionary; and his younger son, Misha, asks him what a Jew is--Ezriel realizes that modern society has given him nothing but pain

and disillusionment. In desperation, he brings Misha to Jochanan, now the rabbi of Marshinov.

'Rabbi, I brought him here. I want him to become a Jew.'

Tears flowed from the rabbi's eyes. 'Well, well. . .'

'Rabbi, I can't stand it anymore!' Ezriel cried out, his voice breaking.

Taking out his handkerchief, the rabbi dabbed at his eyes.

'Did you see the truth?' he asked.

'Not completely. But I saw their lie.'

Ezriel replied.

'It's all the same' (Estate, 344).

Ezriel learns that in the world of The Manor and The Estate, all roads finally lead to Marshinov where the humble, fragile Jochanan absorbs wisdom and releases it lovingly to the Jewish community. The return of the apostates--as they filter in one by one--is a pilgrimage of sorts to their own Jerusalem in Poland. Marshinov has become the "earthly" source of spirit, timeless and awe-inspiring, when modern culture is fleeting, shallow, finally unsatisfying. Miriam Liebe, Calman Jacoby, Clara on the point of death, and Ezriel--all return, traveling almost full-circle to regain their spiritual centers. From melancholy to joy, from living like beasts with no higher purpose than satisfying physical needs--to living for and with God: this is the secret the Rabbi of Marshinov imparts to his followers. Truth is flourishing--although hidden--in this remote Polish village. Upon witnessing the gentle, holy Hasidim, Ezriel can easily imagine the glory of the

great Hasidic courts of the past. These pages near the close of The Estate, devoted to the spiritual nobility of the Hasidim in Marshinov are Singer's cry from the soul, his most moving defense of his own people.

In Marshinov, there was joy. Eyes shone, faces glowed. The glory of God must have descended upon these Jews, the Talmudic scholars, the students of Hassidic study houses. Ezriel did not see in them the symptoms of uncertainty, overindulgence, impatience. He stood on the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles, in the House of Prayer and looked around him. What he saw here was completely contrary to the textbooks. According to the sociologists, poverty was the cause not only of sickness but of crime. But these Jews were a living denial of all these theories. They did not enjoy fresh air, did no exercise, nor did they eat the food recommended by modern physicians. They stooped when they walked, shuffled their feet, spat on the floors, never used forks. Most of them wore patched satin capotes, ragged skull-caps, shabby shoes, torn stockings. They earned their precarious livings from half-stocked stores, tutoring, matchmaking, or brokerage fees. They sighed as they prayed. 'Woe is me. . . . Dear Father. . . . woe and double woe. . . .' This was no privileged class but an assemblage of paupers, less secure than the peasantry and the proletariat. They had been driven out of Russia, were the victims of pogroms; writers had vilified them, calling them parasites; anti-Semites had manufactured false accusations against them. But instead of becoming degenerate, sinking into melancholy, drunkenness, immorality --they celebrated, recited the Psalms, rejoiced with happiness that could only come from the soul. No one here was in despair over the pogroms, as were the Jewish intelligentsia all over Russia. They placed their faith in God, not in man, evolution, or revolution (Estate, 346).

This is what Rabbi Nechemia of Bechev also had to travel full circle to learn; in the end, there is only faith in God.

It was, after all, the humble, politically impotent, peace-loving Jews of the ghetto who managed to form the Beth Din,

a kind of blend of a court of law, synagogue, house of study, and if you will, psycho-analyst's office where people of troubled spirit could come to unburden themselves (Court, Author's Note).

Singer's father was the administrator of such an unofficial court on Krochmalna Street in Warsaw, handling weddings, divorces, dybbuks, and solving problems such as that of the man who wondered if it was permissible to sleep with his dead wife, his poverty being such that he had nowhere else to sleep. The court's precepts were that there is "no justice without godliness" and that "the best judgment is one accepted by all the litigants with good will and trust in divine power" (Court, Author's Note). Idealistically, Singer sees the Beth Din as an example of God's justice and man's merging for once on earth. "It is my firmest conviction," he writes, in a rather optimistic vein, "that the court of the future will be based on the Beth Din, provided the world goes morally forward instead of backward" (Court, Author's Note).

But could their behavior serve as an example for others? Could their conduct become what Kant calls a maxim? Yes, it was possible.

Humanity could abolish warfare, divide the land so that there would be enough for everyone. Each group could have its language, its culture, its traditions. But one thing all would have to have in common: a belief in one God and in free will; a discipline that would transform all man's deeds into serving God and helping one another. In a divine existence, there are no neutral activities. Everything must exalt, purify. But such things could not be brought about forcibly, nor could the Messiah be compelled to arrive (Estate, 349-350).

Singer feels that the Jews had much to offer the modern world, but they did not value their Jewish tradition and faith enough. They could have taught the world--during that ripe, crucial moment of confrontation when they burst into the modern era--that "in Judaism there is nothing secular."¹⁵ Singer emphasizes the fact that Judaism constantly reminds man that he is not alone by attempting to consecrate natural acts, to ritualize a man's life and render it holy from the moment of birth until death. The Jew recites a blessing upon awakening, a blessing for bread, another to thank God for the Day of Rest, and so on. The Jew could teach the world that "any natural act, if hallowed, leads to God."¹⁶ A life dedicated to God becomes enriched with meaning. One can no longer live blindly, for the present alone: one sees that "what seems to be natural is wondrous. There are no sublime facts; there are only divine acts."¹⁷ Or, as Singer says, echoing the Kabbalah, "there is no difference between God and the world. . .the world is a part of God."¹⁸ The Jews,

however, were too intent on absorbing the "new world's" shimmering illusions of progress to convey their own timeless message.

Upon his return to Marshinov, Ezriel is re-awakened to the miracle of awe, which as the Zohar informs us, is "the beginning and gateway of faith, the first precept of all, and upon it the whole world is established." But he still remains an eternal skeptic, disturbed by the uneasy reconciliation between religious truth and scientific facts:

either the world was created in six days or
it had developed over millions of years;
either God had parted the Red Sea or he had
not; either Jesus had been resurrected from
the dead or he had remained dead (Estate, 351).

Ezriel does not wish to base his life on contradiction, and yet. . . . As a Jew, he is one of the chosen people. Chosen for what?--Suffering. As a Jewish man, he is treated like an insect by the ruling classes of his country. His son, Joziek, tells him, "Jews aren't men. You know that, Papa. We're emasculated" (Estate, 59). Is he a slave to the whims of the powerful, or is he free? Ezriel comes to the realization that despite comforting illusions of equality and tolerance,

this is the way it really is: we're a people
without a home and we can't live with anyone.
We remain alien, always the object of mockery
and derision. Nothing has changed. Conditions
are as bad today as they were a thousand years
ago. Even worse: in those days, there was no
'enlightenment.' In those days, at least, Jews
kept their faith. . . (Estate, 359).

But what exactly is this faith? Wherein lies its power? Where is God? Why doesn't He show Himself? Every miracle of nature seems to prove God's existence, while every new scientific discovery apparently refutes it. Rabbi Kook, one of the last great Hasidic mystics, taught

that the holy wisdom of the Jewish mystical teaching when it is revealed in the world, vitalizes everything. It is not hostile to any form of knowledge, or to any elevated ideas. On the contrary, it crowns them all with a yearning for righteousness, goodness, and humility. The desire for righteousness in all its aspects finds its true source in this holy knowledge. Through this wisdom the desire for righteousness finds its realization in action and in life.¹⁹

Is this merely idealism, or can it hold true in a world grown blasé with technology and materialistic with a lack of concern with spiritual matters?

Ezriel finds no answers. As his tormenting pilgrimage to Marshinov nears its end and his Job-like debate with God ceases, his dilemma comes to an abrupt stop. Suddenly, miraculously, he knows what he must do. He must seek and serve God in his own way. Although he is still filled with doubt, he believes in his destiny as a Jew--and for now that is sufficient. He will rejoin his fate to that of the Jews, and go to Palestine, where his son and other Jews are living simultaneously as Jews and as free men. He leaves Marshinov, and follows in the footsteps of Jacob, in The Slave, hoping to renew himself in the birthplace of his faith, where nothing is forgotten. Palestine is, for

Ezriel, "the symbol of the return to my roots, the source of the ancient truths that for thousands of years people have tried to alter, emasculate, or drown in dogma" (Estate, 364). He no longer has "the illusion that our history can be obliterated. The power, whatever it is, that has kept us alive for four thousand years is still with us" (Estate, 365). This acceptance--and even embracement--of one's history is a uniquely Jewish solution.

Singer's awareness of and pride in his Jewish heritage make him, contrary to many scholars' opinions, an authentic Jewish writer: one who "writes from within the spirit and destiny of Israel. In some sense and in whatever language he adds, however humbly, to Torah."²⁰ Torah is more than a book for the Jews; like the universe, it is infinite. The Kabbalists believe that it existed before man in its primordial, greater form. It is God's mystical name which must remain unpronounced; in it, still to be deciphered, lies the secret of secrets. Torah, like Jewish learning, is an endless process--every generation adds its own footnotes, commentaries, revelations and parables. And like the Jewish people, it is miraculously a living, breathing organism. "I imagined I heard the sound of all the living through all the ages," writes Singer (Man, 18). His writing vibrates with the sounds of a four thousand year old drama.

Ironically, in asking the question, "who are the Jews?", we seem to have moved from eternity to eternity--from a

Hasidic rabbi involved in a war with God to the return to a homeland which was once the seat of the Jews' early greatness. "If the eyes of the word often seem to be upon us," writes Elie Wiesel, "it is because we evoke a time gone by and a fate that transcends time."²¹ What exactly does Jewishness consist of? If it "is neither a religion, nor Zionism, nor a sense of being a part of world Jewry, what is it?" asks Singer.²² Perhaps, as he suggests in The Family Moskat and The Manor and The Estate, it is all these things and more: its essence is acceptance of the Jewish destiny--which includes both a suffering past and an uncertain future. As Ezriel says, "I can deny God, but I cannot stop being a Jew--contradictory and strange as these words may sound" (Estate, 365). This belief in his unique heritage and destiny which finally allows Ezriel to move from the limits of the fleeting present to eternal history with grace is a cornerstone of Singer's living faith. As a matter of fact, it is the foundation on which the faith of his heroes rests: Jacob, of The Slave, and Ezriel ultimately accept their Jewishness; Asa Heshel spends his life denying it, yet ironically, dies because of it; and as we shall see in Chapter III, Yasha Mazur, The Magician of Lublin, in his inimitable way, perverts it.

NOTES

¹ Isaac Bashevis Singer on Literature and Life: An Interview with Paul Rosenblatt and Gene Koppel (Tucson: U. of Arizona Press, 1971), p. 33.

² Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Irving Howe, "Yiddish Tradition vs. Jewish Tradition: A Dialogue," Midstream, June/July, 1973, pp. 36-37.

³ Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, Introduction, in A Treasury of Yiddish Stories, ed. and selected by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 9.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Illuminations, ed. and with intro. by Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 264.

⁵ Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 86.

⁶ Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer," Marshall Breger and Bob Barnhart, in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 37.

⁷ Lucy Davidowicz, Introduction, in The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe, ed. Lucy Davidowicz (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 15.

⁸ Herbert Wiener, 9½ Mystics: The Kabbala Today (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 138.

⁹ Israel Ba'al Shem Tov quoted in Martin Buber, The Tales of Rabbi Nachman (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), p. 28.

¹⁰ Mary Ellman, "The Piety of Things in The Manor," in The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Marcia Allentuck, preface by Harry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 125.

¹¹Edward Alexander, Isaac Bashevis Singer (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1980), p. 84.

¹²Irving H. Buchen, Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past (New York: New York University Press, 1968), p. 37.

¹³Ahad Ha-am, "A Spiritual Centre," in The Great Jewish Books and Their Influence on History, ed. Samuel Caplan and Harold U. Ribalow (London: Vision Press, 1963), p. 309.

¹⁴It is curious that the Yiddish original of The Family Moskat has a different conclusion which was not carried over into its English translation. The Yiddish ending consists of twelve more pages during which a group of Jewish intellectuals wonder if by directing their lives toward modern Western culture rather than by basing them on traditional Jewish thought, they have in fact created their present tragedy. The novel ends with a group of Zionists leaving for Israel. Perhaps Singer omitted it from the English version, feeling that he had given the Jews too much responsibility for the approaching Holocaust.

¹⁵Eugene J. Lipman in The Mishnah, selected and ed. by Eugene J. Lipman (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p. 241.

¹⁶Martin Buber, Hasidism and Modern Man, ed. and tr. by Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), p. 144.

¹⁷Abraham Joshua Heschel, Between God and Man: An Introduction of Judaism, from the writings of A. J. Heschel, sel., ed., and intro. By Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: Harper and Bros., 1959), p. 38.

¹⁸Isaac Bashevis Singer on Literature and Life: An Interview with Paul Rosenblatt and Gene Koppel, p. 19.

¹⁹Rabbi Abraham Isaak Kook, in The Wisdom of the Jewish Mystics, ed. Alan Unterman (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 82.

²⁰Ludwig Lewishon, Introduction, in The Great Jewish Books and Their Influence on History, p. 17.

²¹Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York: Random House, 1976), p. xii.

²²Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A New Use for Yiddish" [Review of Sovietish Heimland No. 1 (July-August, 1961)], Commentary, 33 (March 1962), p. 269.

Chapter III

"THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE"

It is no great trick to
be a worker of miracles, a
man who has reached a
certain spiritual rung can
shift heaven and earth--
but to be a Jew, that's
difficult!

--The Yehudi
(the Jew)

Many of Singer's protagonists spend their lives as if on a see-saw, swaying back and forth from doubt to faith and back to doubt again. In their uneasy search for truth, they come across conflicting signs that point to several truths rather than to one. Truth, faith and miracles cannot be pigeon-holed or labelled. Singer's world is one of wonders and wickedness in which there are no easy answers to man's questions. Indeed, most of his seekers find no answer at all. Both Akhsa, in the short story, "A Crown of Feathers," from the collection of that name, and Yasha Mazur, The Magician of Lublin, live in perpetual doubt, suspecting that "the truth is that there is no truth" (Crown, 22).

"A Crown of Feathers" is a beautifully-drawn allegory in which Akhsa, its heroine, exists simultaneously as the symbol of humanity wavering between faith and doubt, and as a tormented young woman attempting to penetrate the mysteries

of existence. Akhsa inhabits a personal, vindictive universe where hidden forces and supernatural powers are as concrete as a blade of grass. It is planned that Akhsa, who is a friendless orphan and the grand-daughter of Reb Naftali Holishitzer and his wife, Nesha, will marry Zemach, a schoolteacher. But after her grandparents' deaths, Akhsa's grandmother, who in life was probably a secret member of the Sabbatai Zevi sect (examined in Chapter IV), materializes as a demon, urging her to abandon Zemach and to convert to Christianity. She gives Akhsa a sign so that she will believe: a crown of feathers with a tiny cross on top. Convinced that the gentile God must be the true one, Akhsa converts and marries the neighboring squire, a forty-five year old miser and lecher. She becomes the Squireess Maria Malkowska, reviled and loathed by both her husband and the Jewish community. No one knows that Akhsa spends most of her sad marriage reading and wondering if she has done wrong in betraying the Jewish God.

In desperation she conjures the Devil. She feels she has nothing left to lose now that she has "betrayed the Jewish God and. . .no longer believe[s] in the Gentile one" (Crown, 20). Her grandfather's spirit suddenly appears, however, and saves her from the Devil. He also orders her to seek out Zemach, the young man she has wronged, as penance for her wickedness. Her grandmother's spirit urges her to remain with the Christians and to forget Zemach and

the Jews. Akhsa is in the middle, being pulled in opposite directions by the spirits of her grandfather and grandmother, who respectively seem to symbolize the forces of good and evil; it is often quite difficult, however, throughout the story to decipher which is which.

Akhsa obeys her grandfather and finds Zemach in the course of her wanderings on the torturous return to her faith. But Zemach is "a wild and contrary man," sterile, and who has already gone through two wives (Crown, 24). One who believes in "the rigor of the law" without mercy, Zemach is overjoyed at the chance to create an exaggeratedly harsh penance for Akhsa and him to submit to (Crown, 29). She obeys his perverse orders silently; she starves, rolls naked in the snow and listens to his bloodcurdling wailing to God: "Let it be Thy will that death shall be the redemption for all my iniquities" (Crown, 32). He wails and beats his breast like a man possessed until it is too late, and Akhsa is dead. "You are a saint," he murmurs over her unseeing, unhearing body, and he disappears, never to be heard from again.

Akhsa lives in doubt until her death.

She had been born rich and beautiful, with more gifts than all the others around her. Bad luck had made everything turn to the opposite. Did she suffer for her own sins or was she a reincarnation of someone who had sinned in a former generation? Akhsa knew that she should be spending her last hours in repentance and prayer. But such was her fate that doubt did not leave her even now (Crown, 34).

Does God or Satan rule the world? Was Zemach a man or a demon? She is given opposing signs that lead her to wonder how many truths there really are, constantly displacing each other. At her death, a riddle confounds the townspeople. Her pillow is ripped open and in it are found, braided, the four letters of God's name: Yud, Hai, Vov, Hai. Singer provides no answer to the riddle, no one truth to unify the story "because if there is such a thing as truth it is as intricate and hidden as a crown of feathers" (Crown, 36). Akhsa is like a person traversing the tight-rope between faith and doubt, ultimately finding no resting place save in death.

Yasha Mazur, The Magician of Lublin, spends most of his life "as if walking the tightrope, merely inches from disaster," trying to find a delicate balance between polarities (Magician, 351). He is in the middle, wildly veering from one extreme to another: faith and doubt, life and death, lust and asceticism, freedom and prison, God and man, and flying and falling to the ground. He is a tragic hero, not believing in compromise. His obsession is that he must live in either one extreme or the other. There is no middle ground. He echoes Blake's proverb: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Having been nurtured on Poor Richard's Almanack rather than on The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, we in the modern world are suspicious of extremes. We've been brainwashed into accepting Ben

Franklin's maxims of self-improvement through self-restraint as gospel. Yes, truth lies in the middle; yes, moderation is the path to wisdom; yes, I want to be healthy, wealthy and wise. . . . Singer comes to us then, as if from another galaxy, landing smack in the middle of our middling culture. For Singer, faith is the crucial question and in matters of faith, there is no alternative but "the road of excess." Although it seems farfetched and somehow horrible, the whole world outside one's window must be regarded as tref, unclean. The moment worldliness enters, Jewishness departs. Singer recalls his parents' reaction to his wanting to be a secular writer; they felt that it was impossible for him--or for anyone--to retain his faith once he entered the world outside Judaism.

It was a great shock to them. They considered all the secular writers to be heretics, all unbelievers--they really were too, most of them. To become a liverat was to them almost as bad as becoming a meshumed, one who forsakes the faith. My father used to say that secular writers like Peretz were leading the Jews to heresy. He said everything they wrote was against God. Even though Peretz wrote in a religious vein, my father called his writing 'sweetened poison,' but poison nevertheless. And from his point of view, he was right. Everybody who read such books sooner or later became a worldly man and forsook the traditions.¹

Reading worldly books is only the first step in a progressive alienation from one's faith. The key to understanding Yasha and his enigmatic story is Singer's belief that there is "no middle road. A single step away from God

plunged one into the deepest abyss" (Magician, 544). Promise in matters of faith is impossible. One cannot stay suspended on a tightrope forever; sooner or later, he must go to one side or the other. A. J. Heschel echoes Singer's ideas.

. . .the world is not a vacuum. Either we make it an altar for God or it is invaded by demons. There can be no neutrality. Either we are² ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil.

Although this philosophy harshly, unpleasantly, invades our modern apathy, it also seems to contain the germ of truth.

It is this, of course, which troubles most critics of The Magician of Lublin: the fact that Yasha moves from one extreme to the other: from a sorcerer and Don Juan to a penitent in his tiny, "self-ordained prison" (Magician, 539). Is it irony, they wonder, that the master escape-artist locks himself in a cage? Would not a milder form of repentance have been more suitable and perhaps more pleasing to God as well? There is something very provoking, very un-Jewish, in Yasha's prison of repentance. Whether we view the ending as ironic, definitely not ironic or simply marred, The Magician of Lublin is the most open, the most dangerously, excitingly suggestive novel that Singer has written.³

Irving Malin, in his study of Singer, calls it a "closed" novel because it deals with one character rather than with a large, bustling cast, as in The Manor.⁴ But I find his terminology misleading. The Manor and The Family Moskat are

"closed" novels in that they belong to a certain genre, they cannot escape from the boundaries of a panoramic, historical family saga. The Magician of Lublin, however, is brilliant: modern, inconclusive, a breathless, feverish work of art; the artist as well as the reader are perpetually on a tightrope. Every event is a surprise. Singer extends his art as far as it will go, he stretches it to the breaking point. His protagonist, Yasha, carries "freedom" to its most death-defying limits. He refuses to compromise with his smaller-minded, prying neighbors or even with God. "When were you in heaven, and what did God look like?" he asks his would-be reformers (Magician, 318). He lives in the realm of possibility, avoiding the restrictions choice necessarily imposes. Multiple identities, many women--an actor with a role or a female to suit each mood, he is a chameleon, an artist, one who cannot say no to those he hypnotizes. He is the "open man" in Malin's more acceptable analysis of the identity of Singer's heroes: "the Jew is somehow defined by his ability to remain open to questions-- . . . he is the open man, as it were."⁵

Can a man soar in the air? Can he cross and re-cross his tightrope between warring dualities with grace? Can he, with his wisdom and sleight of hand, come to be regarded as a minor deity in his own right? Yasha hovers in the nebulous realm between man and God, weaving his way

unsteadily between heaven and earth. He is a magician, an escape-artist, a master of illusion--and so is God, only on a grander scale. "'Oh God Almighty, You are the magician, not I!'" Yasha whispered. 'To bring out plants, flowers and colors from a bit of black soil'" (Magician, 374). Yasha, the artist, never really doubts God's existence. Miracles are his daily bread; making the familiar wondrous is the art of the magician. One who works with the inexplicable and fantastic cannot help but believe in a higher power. Even a snowflake is a sign of God.

Each flake that fell on the window sill was hexagonal, complete with stems and horns, with designs and appendages, formed by that hidden hand which is everywhere--in the earth and in the clouds, in gold and in carrion, in the most distant star and in the heart of man. What can one call this force, if not God? Yasha asked himself. And what difference does it make if it's called nature? He reminded himself of the chapter in Psalms: 'He that planted the ear shall not hear? He that formed the eye shall not see?' He had sought a sign, yet every minute, every second, within him and outside, God signaled His presence (Magician, 554-5).

Yasha explores hypnosis and parapsychology as well, using them as tools to gain who or what he desires. How real and potent are his hypnotic skills and his extra-sensory perception? Not only does he live with several identities, a variety of women and with more than one address reflecting his varying personalities, but he also seems to inhabit different levels of existence. Trusting in his intuition and in hidden forces, he believes that the darkness reveals

what daylight conceals. Love is hypnotism to him; it is all a result of his charismatic, mesmerizing eyes and will; the woman must bend. He is like a magnet, drawing men, women and children into his circle, speaking in a wordless "language in which one soul communicates directly with another" (Shosha, 157). Despite his constant awareness of dark forces and hidden truths, he delights in love, knowing how to make a woman respond exactly as he wishes. Speaking of Knut Hamsun, Singer could be describing his own characters--Yasha, in particular.

His heroes are all children--as romantic as children, as irrational, and often as savage. Hamsun discovered even before Freud that love and sex are a child's game. . . .⁶

Yasha is the perpetual skeptic, with a most childlike, wondrous sense of God and nature. He is wise and naïve. He is a dreamer who transforms his women into elements of his dream: Esther becomes the good wife who remains at home, awaiting her magical husband; Magda, his boyish, scarred assistant, smells of greasepaint and the theatre; Zefitel is his buxom gateway to the thieves who form yet another adoring audience for him; and Emilia, cool, prim, ladylike, a Gentile widow, symbolizes, of course, another world, the mystery and lure of life beyond Poland and beyond the reach of his Jewish God. This is the point where his dreams always end. Can he fly away from his Jewish past? He can imagine the glories of performing in a

European capital, crowned heads bowing, sophisticated people applauding. . . whom? --Yasha and his bag of tricks. But in order to imagine himself there, he must somehow cut off his roots so that he can fly because he knows in his heart that it would no longer be Yasha Mazur.

When we first meet him, he is forty years old and ageless, a rubber man unbounded by gravity and the laws of life, a sacreligious showman and legendary hero to the townspeople of Lublin.

His toes were almost as long and tensile as his fingers, and with a pen in them he could sign his name with a flourish. He could also shell peas with them. He could flex his body in any direction--it was said that he had malleable bones and fluid joints. He rarely performed in Lublin but the few who had seen his act acclaimed his talents. He could walk on his hands, eat fire, swallow swords, turn somersaults like a monkey. No one could duplicate his skill. He would be imprisoned in a room at night with the lock clamped on the outside of the door, and the next morning he would be seen nonchalantly strolling through the market place, while on the outside of the door the lock remained unopened. He could manage this even with his hands and feet chained. Some maintained that he practiced black magic and owned a cap which made him invisible, capable of squeezing through cracks in the wall; others said that he was merely a master of illusion (Magician, 319).

His worst enemy is his ennui which leads him to create increasingly perilous stunts, to multiply his harem and to lose himself in distraction and daydreams, often of himself in flight.

He rose above the ground and soared, soared.
He wondered why he had not tried it before--

it was so easy, so easy. He dreamt this almost every night, and each time awoke with the sensation that a distorted kind of reality had been revealed to him. . . . What a sensation it would cause if he, Yasha, flew over the rooftops of Warsaw or better still--Rome, Paris, or London (Magician, 352).

Esther, his devoted wife, is his anchor. She remains in Lublin, tending his house--they are childless--while he travels to Warsaw to perform before crowds. But this trip is different. For the first time Yasha has a mistress waiting in Warsaw, the elegant, aloof Emilia for whom he feels he would abandon Esther and his faith. Emilia is his ladder to the top. His ambition is limitless and his talent is great, yet he surrounds himself with the dregs of society, with thieves and whores. Perhaps Emilia is correct when she tells him that he has become almost a caricature of himself. Troubled and still undecided, he takes leave of Esther for what may be the last time. In a gloomy burst of foreknowledge, he asks her,

'What would happen if I became an ascetic and to repent, had myself bricked into a cell without a door like that saint in Lithuania? Would you remain true to me? Would you give me food through a slit in the wall?

Esther said, 'It's not necessary to seal one's self in a cell to repent.'

'It all depends on what sort of passion one is trying to control,' he answered (Magician, 339).

On the road to Warsaw, he stops in Piask, legendary den of thieves, to pick up his adoring assistant, Magda, and to frolic with Zeftel, a deserted wife who longs to

follow him to the city. Involuntarily, he and Magda stop in Makov at a synagogue, seeking refuge from a sudden storm. There he reflects on his impenetrable nature and on where it may lead him.

There was always another role for him to play. He was a maze of personalities--religious and heretical, good and evil, false and sincere. He could love many women at once. Here he was, ready to renounce his religion, yet--when he found a torn page from a holy book he always picked it up and put it to his lips. Everyone was like a lock, each with his own key. Only one such as he, Yasha, could unlock all souls (Magician, 372).

The attentive reader will notice the recurring formula, "he, Yasha," signalling his thoughts. He, Yasha, has dreams of grandeur; he bows only to the greater magician, God. His daydreams are of personal artistic glory, yes; but simultaneously, they have messianic overtones. Already we receive a clue that Yasha is more than he appears to be.

Like locusts they fell upon him: his daydreams of harem girls, slaves; tricks that were beyond nature; magic potions, charms, and incantations that unfolded all secrets and bestowed infinite powers. In his imagination he even led the Jews out of exile, gave them back the land of Israel, rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem (Magician, 376).

He, Yasha is at the height of his powers. A living paradox, he is a man on a tightrope who fears the dark. He brings to mind the legendary wisdom and world-weariness of King Solomon. "Together with his ambition and lust for life, dwelt a sadness, a sense of the vanity of everything, a guilt that could neither be repaid nor forgiven" (Magician 410).

In Warsaw, seated in Emilia's salon, he is an incongruous figure. For a moment, the magician seems intimidated, a bit insecure and unsure of himself, but as his sense of his audience, Emilia and her daughter, Halina, grows, so does his easy charm and yet another mask. He talks everyone's language--Zeftel's sleazy, underworld slang, Emilia's witty, cool repartee--but no one speaks his. Words, also, are his tools. But they cannot help him in his latest challenge: in order to be able to wed Emilia, he must both convert to Christianity and acquire a large amount of cash. Emilia is too refined to inquire how he will get it--just so he gets it. He is torn. To turn to crime. . . . But only one crime--to rob old Zaruski, a miser who lives in an apartment with only a deaf servant. What could be easier? And then, finally, to leave Poland for the wide universe, to start a new, nobler life.

As soon as he decides to go ahead and commit the crime, his climactic night of reckoning begins. Unaware of the potent forces dominating him this night, he starts off with the brooding pleasure of the artist, contemplating his life as though it "were a storybook in which the situation grows tenser and tenser until one can barely wait to turn the page" (Magician, 431). Sure of his hypnotic powers, he climbs onto the balcony of the old miser's apartment.

He swung his body upwards. It seemed to have grown weightless. He stood for an instant on the balcony and laughed. The impossible was really so possible (Magician, 451).

The moment he crosses over into the other realm--that of the impossible--the game disintegrates into a nightmare. His constant enemy, distraction, compels him "to weave dreams and fanciful threads which escaped capture, for no sooner did he reach out for them than they unraveled," rather than concentrating on the matter at hand (Magician, 457). Everything suddenly confuses him. Trembling and sweating, he cannot pick the lock to the safe--an elementary one he has often opened before. He hears voices, policemen patrolling below. In panic, he leaps from the balcony, falling on his left foot, leaving behind not only the unopened safe but incriminating pages from his address book.

Failure! A fiasco! For the first time in his life! It had been a terrible night. He was overcome by fear. He knew, deep inside of him, that the misfortune would not be confined to this night alone (Magician, 456).

A shift of powers has taken place. Yasha is no longer in control. He is transformed from Yasha the magician to a "fumbling lout" (Magician, 464). Limping to the study house where he will seek refuge for the rest of the night, Yasha sees clear signs of "God's punishment" and compassion. He is being manipulated like a marionette, being led back to the Jews when his own feet would have carried him to the Christians, being bound with prayer shawl and phylacteries

when he would have robbed an old man.

For years he had shunned the synagogues. All of a sudden, in the course of days, he had twice strayed into houses of worship; the first time on the road when he had been caught in the storm, and now again for the second time. For years he had picked the most complex locks with ease, and now a simple lock which any common safe-cracker could have sprung in a minute had stumped him. Hundreds of times he had leaped from great heights without injury, and this time he had damaged his foot jumping from a low balcony. It was obvious that those in heaven did not intend to have him turn to crime, desert Esther, convert (Magician, 465-6).

He wanted to live in the detached realm of comedy, looking down, amused, at his antics, but with one false move he has plummeted into tragedy. From wealthy Solomon overlooking the world, he has become Job, the questioner, the one who had it all and from whom all was taken away. "One misstep and he had lost everything. . .everything" (Magician, 525). An escape-artist trying to elude God, he finds he cannot. God has His finger on him--much in the same way that he had been able to open any lock, seduce any woman--and he is no longer able to squirm out from under. Yasha must finally choose and limit himself to one woman, one God. "'I must be a Jew!'" he said to himself. 'A Jew like all the others'" (Magician, 467).

The night of reckoning is not yet over, however, even though it is dawn when he leaves the house of worship. Facing the sunlit city, watching the men he had prayed with returning to their work, doubt sets in once more. "It now

seemed that the street and the synagogue denied each other" (Magician, 469). The presence of other men, with their crowded, petty, hypocritical lives, seems to be the primary obstacle to serving God. As the day progresses, Yasha's life collapses until he is left, empty and defenseless, a child once more--but with bitter, weary eyes. First, he visits Emilia who informs him that she has "just read of a woman who let herself be seduced by a madman." Yasha smiles grimly. "You are the woman," he tells her (Magician, 503). Unable to continue the farce, he confesses his attempted crime. Disgusted, apparently more from his failure than from the notion of the burglary, she ends their relationship, unaware that his confession was already a renunciation of her and the life she stands for. Bitterly she tells him, "You must have some sort of covenant with God since he punished you directly on the spot" (Magician, 505). And as if to mark the end of their trance-like affair, Emilia herself is transformed into an aging, gray, tired woman: "As if this were a fairy tale, she had cast off some spell that had kept her eternally young" (Magician, 505). Yasha, the master of illusion, is awakening to the fact that he is full of illusions himself. He is afraid; it is daylight--the true faces of his life will be exposed one by one. He can no longer paint his women as he wants them to be; he realizes that he is "one who dreams and knows that he dreams" (Magician, 521). Hence, his power is gone.

The awakened dreamer has lost the ability to magically transform sordid ugliness into beauty.

He grows lighter as he sheds his past life--la fin d'Emilia. He returns to the apartment he and Magda share only to find her dead. Magda had hanged herself out of jealousy of his women. In horror, he escapes, limping with his painfully swollen foot, into the city. A second delirious, mad night commences as he drifts in a wild, uncaring world. His eyes open wide, his stomach turning with revulsion from the excessive filth, heat and foul odors of the prostitutes, drunkards and poverty he passes, he comes to a street called Bolesc--or pain. "That should be the name of all streets," he said to himself. "The whole world is one great agony" (Magician, 521). His surreal voyage through Warsaw at night leads him past "wild eyes and flushed faces" lit with savage, senseless laughter (Magician, 525). Nauseated and dizzy, he watches the endless procession of people, all of them on show--for what? for whom?--involved in a gruesome masquerade, a self-parody of which they are unaware. Is it to entertain this rabble, these "dancers upon graves," that I have devoted my life? he wonders (Magician, 528). He sees everything in a new light. "Yasha bent his head; he belched and tasted an unfamiliar bitterness. I know, it's the world!" (Magician, 527).

In an attempt to find sanctuary for his soul and relief for his aching foot, he enters a hotel which will not accept him because he does not have his identification papers. In a Kafkaesque scene, he goes out again, identity-less, a solitary wanderer in the night. He finds his way to Zeftel, who had rejoined him in Warsaw, only to discover her in bed with Herman, a pimp and white-slaver, their faces reflecting the aftermath of passion. For the first time, Yasha is ashamed, suffering the "humiliation of one who realizes that despite all his wisdom and experience, he has remained a fool" (Magician, 534). Magda's dead face and the faces of the sleeping couple, Zeftel and Herman, are a revelation of emptiness: "He had looked on the faces of death and lechery and had seen that they were the same" (Magician, 534). He realizes that he has been tricked by the world into finding its lures more desirable and rich than they really are. Too late, he learns that

Satan is like an urchin who teases his friends by asking them to guess what is in his closed hand. Each person guesses that the hand conceals whatever is particularly desirable to himself. But when the hand is opened, it is found to contain nothing.⁷

Satan's hand is opened wide: in it lie all Yasha's past delusions. Yasha turns slowly; the world no longer tempts him. "He had seen the hand of God. He had reached the end of the road" (Magician, 534).

Thus ends the novel proper; in the epilogue, we rejoin

Yasha three years later, in Lublin once again. A disturbing transformation has taken place. Yasha the magician is now known as Reb Jacob the Penitent. He has sealed himself into a space four cubits long and four cubits wide.

He had grown a beard and sidelocks and had put on a wide fringed garment, a long gabardine, and a velvet skull cap. . . . There had not even been sufficient room inside for a bed. His possessions consisted of a straw pallet, a chair, a tiny table, a pelisse with which to cover himself, the copper candlestick which the Rabbi had given him, a water jug, a few holy books, and a shovel with which to bury his excrement (Magician, 538).

Years pass, and to everyone's amazement, Yasha remains in his prison. Three times a day Esther brings him food and, "for her sake," he speaks to her a few minutes. He is not serene, however. Even here in his solitary retreat, the world is still too much with him.

. . . through the tiny window which he had left to admit air and light, evil talk, slander, wrath and false flattery came. It became clear to Yasha why the ancient saints had chosen exile and had never slept twice in the same place; had feigned blindness and deafness and muteness. One could not serve God amongst other men, even though separated by brick walls (Magician, 546).

Also from the small window enter butterflies, bumblebees . . . sounds: "the chirping of birds, the lowing of a cow, the cry of a child" (Magician, 539). He closes the shutters, but he is not meant to remain alone. The rumor has spread that he is a holy saint, a miracle worker--all day long, he must sit at his window, receiving people who have come

from afar to speak to Yasha the magician "as if he were God" (Magician, 547). Esther intrudes "almost hourly, rapping on the shutter" (Magician, 544). His own evil thoughts and fancies, wistful longings for his colorful past, for Emilia, for the crowds, for his tricks, are constant temptations he must watch for. In attempting to atone for his sins--"the number of souls he had committed to torture, to madness, to death"--his only defenses are the Torah and prayer (Magician, 541).

. . .he would actually see God, feel His hand. He would begin to understand why goodness was necessary, would savor the sweetness of prayer, the delicious taste of Torah. It would become clearer to him, day by day, that the Holy books he studied led to virtue and eternal life, that they pointed the way to the purpose of creation, while that which lay behind him was evil--all scorn, theft, murder (Magician, 544).

As though from another world he receives a letter from Emilia who has remarried. Her judgment on him is gentler than his own. "I do not dare to tell you what is right or wrong," she writes,

but it does seem to me that you have inflicted too severe a punishment upon yourself. Despite your strength you are a delicate person and you must not endanger your health. The fact is you've committed no crime. . . (Magician, 559).

The great question is: is he guilty, or not? Has he, in truth, committed a crime, or not? Perhaps earth's court this once would have been more lenient than God's. Emilia ends her letter--and Singer ends the novel--with these words:

"May God watch over you. Your eternally devoted, Emilia"
(Magician, 560).

According to Kabbalistic thought, hovering over every person is both an angel and a demon, watching as he makes ethical decisions. At his death, depending on his decisions, he will be taken either to heaven or to Gehenna. Yasha's turning point is the burglary.

That enemy which for years had lurked in ambush within him, who Yasha had had, each time, to repel with force and cunning, with charms and such incantations as each individual must learn for himself, had now gained the upper hand. Yasha felt its presence--a dybbuk, a satan, an implacable adversary who would disconcert him while he was juggling, push him from the tightrope, make him impotent (Magician, 456).

Ironically, his secret enemy, his hidden strength, all these years--he had not known it--was God. It is like Samson's hair. The story of Samson is not the story of man's betrayal by evil woman as is so often thought. It is a story of faith vs. doubt. Samson's strength is not his hair; it is his faith in God. The moment his faith leaves and he no longer believes in God and is instead content to play with his Philistine mistress and believe in her idols with her is when his strength leaves.

When he was in the tavern, Yasha played the atheist but, actually, he believed in God. God's hand was evident everywhere. Every fruit, blossom, pebble, and grain of sand proclaimed Him (Magician, 320).

When he thinks not only of converting, but of committing a crime in order to hasten his conversion, he loses his

strength. The Magician of Lublin is a moral tale disguised, as are the Biblical legends. Yasha himself is disguised as a libertine who is puritannical about his passions, a Casanova who detests women, an artist who loathes the crowd for whom he performs. He is a living paradox, a holy sinner, one who asks too much from reality, more than he can bear. Seeing himself surrounded by hypocritical, lying lives, he falls into despair and rage--so he sins--out of the void--unaware that even at the lowest point of his degradation, when he feels himself totally abandoned by God, impotent with his women, bereft even of his powers of illusion, feeling that he is finally facing harsh reality--he is at that moment being watched over and protected by God.

His guardian angel, watching over him at the burglary, brings him down to earth from his tightrope with a thud and back to his truth, which is the same as Asa Heshel's in The Family Moskat, as Ezriel Babad's in The Manor and The Estate, and as Jacob's in The Slave. In The Family Moskat, Asa Heshel's estranged wife, Adele, finally discovers after much heartbreak, the source of Asa Heshel's confusion and misery. He is "one of those who must serve God or die. He had forsaken God and because of this he was dead--a living body with a dead soul" (Moskat, 580). This is the core, the propelling force behind all Singer's protagonists: if they do not devote their lives to serving God in one

way or another, they are incapable of truly functioning. The problem, of course, is how to serve "a mute God whose nature is unknown, whom one does not know how to serve, and even whether any service rendered Him is appreciated" (Estate, 352). The story of Cain and Abel illustrates man's predicament. It is a cruel lesson in injustice, unsoftened by motive or reasoning--either God's or Cain's--giving man the vision of a bleak universe where the concept of "deserving" is a wistful myth. Man gives into the emptiness, into the void--not knowing whether his gift will be accepted, like Abel's, or spurned, without word, like Cain's. Each brother offered the fruits of his labor: Abel, a shepherd, gave the first of his flock, and Cain, a farmer, gave of his harvest. Why did God "respect" Abel's offering and reject Cain's? Was there any inherent difference in the quality of the brothers' gifts to the Lord? The Torah does not seem to suggest any. Or did the character of Cain simply displease the Lord? Did He, in his divine foreknowledge, perhaps know of Cain's violent temper that would lead to the first murder the world had ever known? It still seems unjust, however. But who knows what God wants? Each man must find his own path to righteousness and follow it as best he can. For Jacob, it exists in Sarah, the peasant woman he has converted into a Jewish saint. For Asa Heshel, death is the answer because his entire life was an act of fleeing God, of attempting to

hide from Him; when he ultimately realizes the Nazi doom is overtaking his people, he can do no more than wait and die with them. Ezriel, luckily, wakes up in time; his children alert him to the futility of his rootless existence. He returns to the source of his faith, Palestine, where he hopes to start a new life as a free man.

Yasha is different. An ascetic posing as an amoral, godless profligate, his greatest role comes in fooling the reader. Who can believe that Yasha, the Jewish Don Juan as one critic calls him, the tolerant, sensual, laughing artist will one day lock himself into a shed, don Hasidic garments and devote the remainder of his life to solitary communion with God? How did the man for whom love and sex were a game develop such a deadly serious alternative to them? But there are clues that the change is not as drastic as it appears to be. Yasha is not what he seems. He is a man of God hiding behind the mask of a sinner. His passions never stop tormenting him. At a farce he witnesses with Emilia, he is filled with hatred for the Warsaw society surrounding him.

Artfully, they had fused religion with materialism, connubiality with adultery, Christian love with worldly hate. But he, Yasha, remained a bedeviled spirit. His passions flayed him like whips. Never had he ceased to suffer regret, shame, and the fear of death (Magician, 413).

Women are repulsive to him: "He lusted after women, yet hated them as a drunkard hates alcohol" (Magician, 413). The psychology of the Don Juan invariably reveals a misogynist for whom women are not living, breathing human beings, but rather "creatures of the dark," masses of sensual orifices to be penetrated, filled, and then, abandoned, with an aftertaste of nausea. When the women begin to take on names, addresses, idiosyncrasies, in short, identities beyond that of their gender, they become boring, ugly, and even horrifying. Their concern for Yasha translates into spiderous longings to weave a web around him. He fears and detests these vile, lewd creatures that recall the earth in its fecundity.

Yasha should have been a monk, cloistered in his cell, free to desire women from a distance but never to become a slave to passion again. Unfortunately, for him, in his cell he is even more a slave to lust than he was before. Desire torments him every moment he is awake. All nature teaches fertility, rhythmic procreation, the tides of desire; he cannot lock the whole world out. Every self-imposed prison has a loophole. Moreover, Judaism has never believed in wilfully denying one's sexual appetite and consecrating it as a gift to God. What is the thunderous God of the Old Testament to do with the dubious offering of the frustrated, chaste wombs and sublimated celibate longings of nuns and monks? It seems a puny gift, somehow ungrateful and beside

the point, to give to the Jewish God who commands his people to "be fruitful and multiply." Hence, Judaism has always frowned on self-mortification and enforced celibacy. What the Talmudic sages sought to do, instead, was to provide a religious, ritualistic framework to marital, sexual relations, thereby creating harmony between the spirit and the body. The extreme penitence of a Zemach, in "A Crown of Feathers," is alien to most Jews. Sitting and rolling naked in snow and ice, flagellation, exaggerated fasting, and so on--all are most un-Talmud-like methods of approaching God, heavily influenced by Christianity. Judaism has always sought to draw together the sacred and the profane. As Gershom Scholem points out, "The asceticism of the typical Hasid concerns solely his social relations towards women, not the sexual side of his married life."⁸ Even in the writings of the Jewish mystics, one finds a refreshing, striking blend of other-worldliness and earthiness that is quite unique. According to Jewish tradition,

The salvation of man does not lie in his holding himself far removed from the worldly, but in consecrating it to holy, to divine meaning: his work and his food, his rest and his wandering, the structure of the family and the structure of society.⁹

Yasha's renunciation of the world, then, is troubling. It is not a Jewish solution. To lock oneself away from all temptation is a rejection of God's gift of free will. Man is reduced to the level of a beast roaming in his cage.

The Rabbi of Lublin attempts to dissuade Yasha from his decision; "man deprived of free will" is "like a corpse," he tells him (Magician, 537). But Yasha does not listen; he finds precedents and arguments in his favor in ancient books. Is there any saintliness to his choice?

Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, once asked his friend the Maggid of Dubno to give him ethical instruction so that he might strengthen himself in the service of God. Now the Gaon was known as a man of saintly disposition who spent all his waking time secluded in his room, in study, prayer and contemplation. So the Maggid of Dubno said to him: It is easy to be a gaon (sage) and a saint cloistered here in your room. You should go out into the market place and try to be a saint there.¹⁰

Perhaps the best atonement for Yasha would have been to remain, a loving husband, with Esther. She is still, as she always was, a deserted wife; but now she has aged, she is heavy-hearted, she can see her husband from her window but she cannot touch him--it is almost too painful for her to bear. Yasha always had faith in God. Why couldn't he be a saint in the marketplace? What was missing in his faith that led him to imprison himself? The answer is that his previously abstract, vague faith, undisciplined, and requiring nothing of him, was insufficient. "Just as literature cannot be abstract, neither can religion be abstract," says Singer.¹¹ In his soul-searching during his long night, Yasha hits on the truth of what it is God needs from man--or perhaps, it is what man needs from God.

Why did God need these capotes, these sidelocks, these skullcaps, these sashes? how many more generations would wrangle over the Talmud? How many more restrictions would the Jew put on himself? How much longer would they wait for the Messiah, they who had already waited two thousand years? God was one thing, these man-made dogmas another. But was one able to serve God without dogmas? How had he, Yasha, come to be in his present predicament? He most certainly would not have been involved in all these love affairs and other escapades if he had put on a fringed garment and had prayed thrice daily. A religion was like an army--to operate it required discipline. An abstract faith inevitably led to sin. The prayer house was like a barracks; there God's soldiers were mustered (Magician, 512).

He comes to understand that "harsh laws were merely fences to restrain a man from sin" (Magician, 537). A concrete course of action is what he needs. The living faith is a complex union of halakhah and agadah; one cannot exist successfully without the other. Halakhah is the code of laws, the discipline, the rational "army" side of religion. Agadah encompasses that which is beyond expression; it is the haven of mysticism, exploring the inward, spiritual meaning of the laws. Before, Yasha's faith had been a form of "deism, a belief in God without dogma or revelations" (Magician, 557). His subsequent night of torment is "proof of how little help a faith without discipline was to a person in a spiritual crisis" (Magician, 557). It seems to be man, then, not God, who needs the capotes and sidelocks, the sashes and commentaries. And "as long as one believed in God and the Torah," reasons Yasha, "why compromise? If

there was a God and His law was true, then He must be served night and day" (Magician, 509).

But dogma alone is also inadequate because it does not delve to the heart of the problem--it merely forbids or restricts its external manifestations. For example, Yasha's decision to lock himself up comes to light during his traumatic night when he escapes to the study house. Picking up a book at random from the shelves, Eternal Paths by Rabbi Leib of Praga, he opens it to the middle and reads this verse from Scripture: "He closeth his eyes not to see evil," with its

Talmudic interpretation: 'Such a man is one who does not look at women while they stand at their washing'. . . . If a man did not look, he did not lust, and if he did not lust, he did not sin (Magician, 512-3).

Rather than exploring why Yasha needs to curb his lust--why he is so tempted by so many women--the sages advise not looking at women, period. The rules are to protect the believer, to hypnotize him into feeling himself safe--perhaps even to render him safe in his walled prison. But for one such as Yasha--for one who always heretofore refused to compromise--such an attempt seems doomed to failure. The wall has a window and the penitent has eyes which cannot forever remain shut.

Religion is a tightrope spanning polarities that must be bridged: halakhah and agadah, body and spirit, good and evil. Yasha himself is the embodiment of the sacred and

the profane. In his withdrawal from the world, he echoes God's tsim-tsum which, in Kabbalistic terminology, explains the creation of the world and the birth of evil. Very briefly, God contracted Himself, retreated within Himself, in order to create a world which is not Himself. A Midrash to Genesis explains that "The Holy One blessed be He is the place of the world but the world is not His place." Through this withdrawal, God creates evil in order to allow his creatures the freedom of choice between good and evil. Yasha is

aware that evil was merely God's diminishing of Himself to create the world, so that He might be called Creator and have mercy toward His creatures. As a king must have subjects, so a Creator must create, so a benefactor must have his beneficiaries. To this extent, the Lord of the Universe had to depend upon His children. But, it was not enough to guide them with His merciful hand. They had to learn to cleave to the path of righteousness by themselves, of their own free will (Magician, 542).

He doesn't seem fully conscious, however, of the fact that his own version of tsim-tsum perverts its original purpose which was to provide man with free will. "If there is no God," he tells himself in a doubting mood, "man must behave like God" (Magician, 543). But if Yasha chooses to imitate God, he has performed only the first part of the act: God's tsim-tsum is followed by His emanation, His return to the world. The escape-artist has forgotten to escape.

He seems to have made a long, circuitous journey--from

Yasha the magician to Reb Jacob the Penitent. But how far has he, in fact, traveled--if at all? And is he serving God in his own way--or his own desire to be god-like?

Yasha was never one to be a puppet, a slave of God, like the other Jews. He must stand out from the crowd. He is a larger-than-life character: one who follows his truth to its farthest limits. If God is an escape-artist, forever eluding man, then so is Yasha. If God is a magician, so is Yasha. If God withdraws within Himself, so does Yasha. And if God is at one end of the tightrope, Yasha is at the other.

Yasha is suspended in the middle of Singer's world: at one end stands Jacob, firm and strong in his unwavering faith; at the other end, the irresolute Asa Heshel, seduced by modern Western culture.

The idea is that a person who cannot live with the religious dogma and cannot live with the worldly dogma is a lost person, and there's nothing left except to remain in the mirror. In other words, to remain suspended between two worlds. In a way it means death. . . .¹²

Although Singer is speaking here of his short story, "The Mirror," which he transformed into a play, he could very well be describing Yasha's peculiar position among his protagonists. Having rejected both the worldly ethos and religious faith, Yasha is left alone, hovering in mid-air, with no reason to live. In a way Singer sees Yasha in his cell as one of the living dead. And as we shall see in

Chapter IV, when nothing else is left, when neither faith nor pleasure in society remain, then the will to believe comes into power: it is the last resort of the desperate Jews who have nothing left to cling to.

NOTES

¹Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), pp. 15-16.

²Abraham Joshua Heschel, Between God and Man, ed. Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: Harper & Bros., 1959), p. 257.

³No one really likes the ending of The Magician of Lublin, but it has provided a field-day for Singer's critics who are vehement in their various interpretations of it. Three examples: Morris Golden, in his essay, "Dr. Fischelson's Miracle: Duality and Vision in Singer's Fiction" in The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, perceives the irony of "a portrait of an uncertain penitent for an uncommitted crime, served by a devoted wife doomed to no reward" (p. 30). Karl Malkoff, on the other hand, in his essay, "Demonology and Dualism: The Supernatural in Isaac Singer and Muriel Spark," in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, sees no "internal evidence of irony on the part of the author" (p. 153). And Irving Buchan, in Isaac Bashevis Singer and The Eternal Past, merely deplures Singer's "marred endings" (p. 116).

⁴In his book, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Irving Malin divides Singer's novels in two categories: "open" (The Family Moskat, The Manor and The Estate) and "closed" (Satan in Goray, The Magician of Lublin, The Slave). "Open" signifies scope, vast worlds; while "closed" novels deal with one or a few protagonists in a smaller world. It is primarily a matter of conflicting viewpoints towards Singer's art, since "open" to me suggests experimentation in literary technique, open endings, etc. which are characteristic of the shorter novels, while "closed" seems to denote a more traditional, predictable genre of writing, typical of the historical novel.

⁵Irving Malin, Isaac Bashevis Singer (New York: Frederick Ungar Publ., 1972), p. 21.

⁶Isaac Bashevis Singer, Introduction to Knut Hamsun's Hunger (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), p. ix.

⁷Sayings of the Bratslaver in The Wisdom of Israel, ed. Lewis Browne (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1945), p. 565.

⁸Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 106.

⁹Martin Buber, Hasidism and Modern Man (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), p. 50.

¹⁰The Wisdom of the Jewish Mystics, ed. Alan Unterman (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 43.

¹¹Isaac Bashevis Singer on Literature and Life: An Interview with Paul Rosenblatt and Gene Koppel (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1971), p. 30.

¹²Isaac Bashevis Singer in an interview quoted by Paul Kresh in Isaac Bashevis Singer: The Magician of W. 86th Street, A Biography (New York: Dial Press, 1979), p. 314.

Chapter IV

"CHILDREN FROM THE CHAMBER OF YEARNING"

A king dropped a gem out of his ring, and gave his favorite son a clue as to its whereabouts. Thus he might show his diligence and sagacity in pleasing his father. Likewise, God has dropped sparks of holiness upon the world. Through His Torah He gives Israel clues regarding the places they have fallen on earth, so that Israel may return them to Him.

--Israel Ba'al Shem Tov

With what seems almost unjustifiable ease, Satan, that veteran of old wives' tales and children's fears, has resurfaced in the twentieth century, in full regalia, masquerading as none other than himself, Samael, Prince of Darkness. Unashamed to be an anachronism, Satan struts proudly, having been restored to full power in Singer's fiction, where the war between good and evil rages on as though modern minds had not declared it obsolete. Who--or what--is Satan? The question of evil obsesses Singer. Evil not only exists as a substantial force for Singer; he sees it as a major power dominating the world. It is his answer to the eternal problem of Jewish suffering. Only

by casting Satan in his ancient role and thereby making him concrete and visible can Singer isolate and analyze the sources and reasoning for that suffering.

The traditional rabbinical answer, that the Jews are being punished for their transgressions, is as unsatisfactory to Singer as another popular view, that of the Father Who always chastises His favorite children. In the wake of Hitler, it is rather difficult for Jews--and for many others--to envision a God so merciless and revengeful as to condone the Holocaust. What sins could merit being almost obliterated from the face of the earth? A third answer to the perpetual plaint of the Jews: Why us?--is a version of God's reply to Job--which is considered by many to be no answer at all. The questioner is encouraged to have blind faith in God and to cease questioning His inscrutable ways; anger is thus transformed into humility, and the question is evaded. This view, although awe-inspiring, has never been comforting, which the fourth and last view certainly is, if it is nothing else. Here, patience is urged: justice will be done, not now, perhaps, in this world, but surely in the future world, when the Messiah comes. "When the Messiah comes" is the wistful Jewish panacea to seemingly endless pain.

Singer, however, distinguishes between two kinds of evil. There is evil that comes from God--earthquakes, volcanoes, plagues, etc.,--in the face of which man is

virtually helpless. But man-made evil also exists--wars, murders, and so on--that man himself can and must control. It is evil born of man that most concerns Singer; in its various manifestations, he calls it Satan. In his most powerful guise, transformed as "the will to believe," twisting the truth in order to suit one's dreams, Satan deals unmercifully with the deluded, cursed inhabitants of both Frampol in "The Gentleman from Cracow" and of Goray in Satan in Goray.

"The Gentleman from Cracow," from Singer's first collection of tales, Gimpel the Fool, provides an exact parallel to the situation of the novel, Satan in Goray. The story begins with the air of a legend lost in time: "In the community house there was a parchment with a chronicle on it, but the first page was missing and the writing had faded" (Gimpel, 35). The tale the narrator proceeds to tell is fantastic and wondrous, an allegorical fairy tale illustrating the danger of "the will to believe" that leads an entire town to transform the truth into palatable dreams. Frampol is a destitute village that has lost all means of economic support. The villagers are hopelessly "about to go begging" when a handsome, wealthy young Jewish doctor miraculously arrives in their town (Gimpel, 37). He comes like a force, demolishing obstacles and renewing life in a spirit of mystery. Neither the villagers nor the reader are certain if the force is one of

good or of evil. There are signs that the young stranger is more than he seems: his careless dismissal of religious laws, his cardplaying, love of wine and boisterous activities; but we are like the villagers in that we don't wish to believe in the evil we sense because of the good he accomplishes: the food and money he dispenses to the needy in the town and the hope, laughter and liveliness he reawakens. "The Gentleman from Cracow" is a perfect, compressed description of the Jewish will to believe, a phenomenon that we shall examine in greater detail in Satan in Goray. "The deluded people" are determined to fabricate reality, to make of this glorious, mystical stranger their long-awaited Messiah (Gimpel, 53).

Rabbi Ozer stands alone against the young man and the whole town: he "constantly warned his flock that they walked a downhill path led by the Evil One, but they paid no attention to him" (Gimpel, 44). Events rush to a screaming climax when the gentleman suddenly proposes a grand ball in order to choose his wife from among the maidens of Frampol. He sweeps away every objection except those of Rabbi Ozer:

'What kind of charlatan is this?' he shouted.
'Frampol is not Cracow. All we need is a ball!
Heaven forbid that we bring down a plague, and
innocent infants be made to pay for our
frivolity' (Gimpel, 41).

Rabbi Ozer is the only one who remains sane despite the gentleman's fabulous promises; one holy man waging a war

against evil cannot be blamed if he does not succeed. The villagers heedlessly proceed with their lavish preparations for the ball until the rabbi is forced to give way and to accept the inevitable.

Nowhere in his fiction does Singer demonstrate so magically the almost forgotten art of story-telling as in his description of the night of the ball. It begins ominously: "The setting sun, remarkably large, stared down angrily like a heavenly eye upon the Frampol marketplace" (Gimpel, 49). After the young women dance, the gentleman steps to the center and speaks.

Listen to me. I have wonderful things to tell you, but let no one be overcome by joy. Men, take hold of your wives. Young men, look to your girls. You see in me the wealthiest man in the entire world. Money is sand to me, and diamonds are pebbles. I come from the land of Ophir, where King Solomon found the gold for his temple. I dwell in the palace of the Queen of Sheba. My coach is solid gold, its wheels inlaid with sapphires, with axes of ivory, its lamps studded with rubies and emeralds, opals and amethysts. The Ruler of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel knows of your miseries, and he has sent me to be your benefactor. But there is one condition. Tonight, every virgin must marry. I will provide a dowry of ten thousand ducats for each maiden, as well as a string of pearls that will hang to her knees. But make haste. Every girl must have a husband before the clock strikes twelve (Gimpel, 50).

The enchanted townspeople gaze at the mythical gentleman; a spirit of "gaiety and intoxication" rules the night (Gimpel, 49). As if in a trance, the people, madly mismatched through a system of lottery, wed one another. The

gentleman's bride is Hodle, the daughter of Lipa the Ragpicker. She is a sinful glutton and thief who feeds on the carcasses of beasts. A devilish wedding ensues, demons and witches darken the sky and the gentleman reveals that he is none other than Ketev Mriri, Chief of the Devils, and a loathsome, scaly creature to boot. One old man protests, but is roughly gagged until he dies. The rest of the townspeople and the demons dance in orgiastic lust until the first star of the morning heralds the dawn.

In the morning, the holy Rabbi Ozer goes to the marketplace where he is greeted by a horrifying vision.

. . . everything had turned to mud; the town of Frampol, stripped and ruined, had become a swamp. Its inhabitants were mud-splashed, denuded, monstrous. For a moment, forgetting their grief, they laughed at each other. The hair of the girls had turned into elflocks, and bats were entangled there. The young men had grown gray and wrinkled; the old were yellow as corpses. In their midst lay the old man who had died. Crimson with shame, the sun rose (Gimpel, 57).

He awakens the townspeople from their dream. Filled with shame and horror, they discover that the infants, as the rabbi had foretold, are the true "victims of the passion for gold that had caused the inhabitants of Frampol to transgress": they are all found dead in their charred cribs (Gimpel, 59). The people realize that Ketev Mriri had come in search of his bride, Lilith, who was disguised as Hodle, the ragpicker's daughter. The fairy tale ends in a nightmare as they are forced to finally face the truth.

Paupers once more, the people of Frampol shake off their grief and begin rebuilding their town with the aid of neighboring communities. Rabbi Ozer dies soon after, but his spirit continues to protect Frampol: "A white pigeon is often seen on the roof: the sainted spirit of Rabbi Ozer" (Gimpel, 61). The sole consolation is that the people have learned their painful lesson: "the lust for gold had been stifled in Frampol, it was never rekindled" (Gimpel, 61). The greed that led the villagers to believe in the goodness of the satanic stranger is gone forever.

There are many candidates for the role of Satan in Singer's thought-provoking, enigmatic first novel, Satan in Goray. Evil is explored from a variety of vantage points, each seeming to lead to a different conclusion. The central situation is the undermining of a religion, the trials it undergoes--from without and from within--in its attempt to survive in a world that seems bent on its destruction. The novel spans an era of Jewish history (which we will examine), from about 1648 to 1666, so fascinating, macabre and inexplicable that it seems to belong more in the realm of fiction than in that of fact. Singer employs a unique method to bridge the gap between history and legend. The first twelve chapters are told by a detached, factual historian whose dry recital of the outlandish, unbelievable happenings arouses more compassion and shock in the reader than a more sentimental version would have. Then, without

warning, chapters thirteen and fourteen, the last chapters in the book, retreat outwardly from the story into generalities and Biblical language ("and it came to pass..."). They are allegedly taken from the pages of a pious Yiddish instruction book, teaching women and children about the dangers of evil and treating the "factual" story recounted in the previous twelve chapters as a "marvellous tale" (Satan, 219). This device provides a frame for the tale, a moralistic ending ("Let none attempt to force the Lord: To end our pain within the world: The Messiah will come in God's own time. . ."), and most interesting of all, the intriguing contrast with the "facts" given us by our dispassionate observer in the main body of the novel. The "hero" of the earlier part is exposed as a follower of Satan--or perhaps even Satan himself--and the fanatical, hypocritical Sabbatians are suddenly viewed as righteous, heroic men. The pious narrator of the last two legendary chapters seems to rebuke the historian for adhering too closely to the facts: the distance of time distorts what once seemed to be truth. Heroes are transformed into villains and sinners into saints. Imagination and reality together form history; distinguishing good from evil seems to be the task of the artist, not the historian.

To give an even more complete version of the "truth," Singer tells the same story on three levels, each of which enhances and echoes the others. Satan in Goray is the

simultaneous portrait of a woman, a town and a religion torn apart, almost destroyed--first by acts of violence and then, by wishful thinking in a vain attempt to deny harsh reality. Rechele, a citizen of Goray, in her madness and vulnerability, is the personification of the effects of isolation, persecution, ignorance and superstition on an innocent mind. As we shall see, she is Goray come to life. She is a violin string, intensely responsive, tuned to the events of her time. The climax of her story, and of the novel itself, is her impregnation by Satan. But again, who--or what--is Satan?

In this obliquely told drama, the two great perpetrators of evil, Bogdan Chmielnicki and Sabbatai Zevi, whose evil acts are the catalysts for the despair and follies of the characters in the novel, remain off-stage; the remote, impoverished village, Goray, takes center-stage. Singer, by focusing on Goray's transformation at the invisible hands of these two agents of Satan--from a bustling Jewish community to a deserted ruin to a fiery Sodom and Gomorrah--manages to convey the extent of the anguish of all Jews everywhere during that time and for many years after. The novel begins with the matter-of-fact tone of the historian who chronicles the first great evil to assault the Jews, one for which they are both guiltless and unprepared: Chmielnicki's massacres.

In the year 1648, the wicked Ukrainian hetman, Bogdan Chmelnicki, and his followers besieged the city of Zamosc but could not take it, because it was so strongly fortified; the rebelling haidamak peasants moved on to spread havoc in Tomaszow, Bilgoraj, Krasnik, Turbin, Frampol--and in Goray, too, the town that lay in the midst of the hills at the end of the world. They slaughtered on every hand, flayed men alive, murdered small children, violated women and afterward ripped open their bellies and sewed cats inside. Many fled to Lublin, many underwent baptism or were sold into slavery. Goray, which once had been known for its scholars and men of accomplishment, was completely deserted. The market place, to which peasants from everywhere came for the fair, was overgrown with weeds, the prayer house and the study house were filled with dung left by the horses that the soldiers had stabled there. Most of the houses had been leveled by fire. For weeks after the razing of Goray, corpses lay neglected in every street, with no one to bury them. Savage dogs tugged at dismembered limbs, and vultures and crows fed on human flesh. The handful who survived left the town and wandered away. It seemed as though Goray had been erased forever (Satan, 3-4).

Sixteen years later, the rehabilitation of this Jewish ghost town commences. Slowly the former citizens trickle back. Life begins once more, only to be threatened by a second evil--one that will ruin from within what Chmielnicki destroyed from without--the advent of Sabbatai Zevi, the false Messiah, whose evil was not confined to his own age or his own area, but which spread like a plague impossible to halt, through time and countries, infiltrating the dispersed house of Israel and weakening it as much as did the murderer Chmielnicki and his band.

In order to comprehend the devastation that lay waste to entire communities and posed a formidable threat to the continued existence of Judaism, it is necessary to understand the nature of Sabbatai Zevi and his heretical movement. The world, to Singer, is a battleground between good and evil; and life is the constant process of exercising one's free will. The story he tells over and over from different perspectives, like variations on a theme, is that of man's choice between good and evil. To decipher which is which in a deceptive world is the goal of humanity; to aid man in distinguishing between the two is perhaps the major task of the author. What particularly fascinates him in Satan in Goray is evil parading itself as good: snakes underneath and beauty without, and its contrary, inner goodness and outer evil. The horned, scaly serpent, Ketev Mriri, masking himself as a wealthy, charming young doctor in "The Gentleman from Cracow," is an example of evil disguising itself as good. The entire Sabbatian movement is based on the second extreme: its devotees are urged to perform wicked, sacrilegious acts outwardly, while inwardly, guarding the sacred, holy essence of their faith. It is a Marrano-like movement, designed to please those who live dual lives. The Marranos were Jews who, during the Spanish Inquisition, were offered the choice of conversion to Christianity or death by torture. Although many Jews perished in the flames of the Spanish death chambers, quite a few chose to convert,

outwardly appearing to be good Christians; but inside their homes and their hearts following the Jewish religion, observing its holy days and performing its rites in secret and at great risk. The Sabbatians took this secretive way of life on their own initiative--no one was pursuing them, no other culture forcing them to convert--and formed a Messianic movement based on betrayal, appealing to the Jews who must live like Marranos and hide their true faith from the ruling classes of their country. Outwardly, evil; inwardly, Jewish. The absurdity, in retrospect, is that this confusing, contradictory rebellion against orthodox Judaism was born in the individual perversions of one man, Sabbatai Zevi (1625-1676) and later generalized into law for his followers. He was a manic-depressive who felt compelled to perform bizarre, heretical acts, contrary to the traditional nature of Judaism. According to Gershom Scholem,

his truly original characteristic is without any doubt to be found in the peculiarity of his mania: the commission of antinomian acts which in his state of exaltation he appears to have regarded as sacramental actions. That was his specific trait and that was also his specific contribution to the Sabbatian movement in which he played on the whole a fairly passive part, for it was this peculiarity which gave its special character to the movement from the moment when he had first been recognized as a religious authority. The law which dominated this development was the law of his own personality, although it was left to Nathan of Gaza to discover it in him and to formulate it in conscious terms. In his state of illumination he was the living archetype of the holy sinner. . . .²

The character of Nathan of Gaza (1644-1680) is far more intriguing than that of Sabbatai Zevi, who seems to have been for the most part a victim of his own mental sickness. Nathan of Gaza, a young Kabbalistic prodigy and self-styled public relations man, saw in the charismatic, wavering Zevi the perfect tool for his plans. He became the mastermind behind the Messianic movement; he was the prophet, Zevi his puppet. He instilled into Zevi the certitude that he was indeed the Messiah for whom the world had been waiting. A genius of publicity, without ever once leaving their home ground of Palestine during the peak of their movement, Nathan of Gaza managed to release letters, proclamations and fabrications about the legendary character of the Messiah who had finally come to earth designed to incite a furor in Jewish communities all over the world.

To cement the tie between Sabbatai Zevi and the mythical concept of an abstract Messiah--in Judaism, more a symbol than a man--Nathan of Gaza used Kabbalistic doctrines to prove his "candidate's" worthiness, much in the way a modern politician is "sold" to his public through advertisements and publicity. For example, at the heart of the Lurianic Kabbalah is the concept of tikkun which means the restoration of the original order. Focusing on the Jew's mission on earth which is to seek out evil all over the world, tikkun simultaneously functions as a comforting explanation of the Jewish exile as well. According to the Kabbalah, during the

Creation, "holy sparks" somehow mingled with impure substances; this is why good and evil are often inextricably bound together. When all the "holy sparks" are reclaimed and hence, redeemed by the wandering Jews, the Messiah will finally begin his reign on earth. The "holy sparks" are to be found everywhere: in the heart of the forbidden, in sins, in the unclean. Therefore, the Jew who wishes to redeem the sparks must paradoxically sin by delving into the forbidden and the profane. Nathan of Gaza seized on this confused notion and enlarged it brilliantly to condone evil. Thus, he shrewdly took Zevi's weakness and magnified it into the fundamental principle of their movement: that the Messiah must descend into evil in order to conquer it. Hence, Zevi's inversion of the Ten Commandments, his blasphemy in synagogues, his lewd rites and personal peculiarities were explained. Moderate Sabbatians thought that only Zevi, as their leader, had to perform wicked acts. Radicals, however, felt that they, too, should follow him into the realm of evil. The Sabbatians also drew support from the ancient Jewish tradition that the Messiah will come only to a generation that is either completely good or to one that is completely evil. Therefore, they rationalized that they were merely hastening the Messianic Era with their corruption of religious law.

Distorted, exaggerated rumors of the odd events in Palestine finally reach the inhabitants of Goray in their

remote corner of the world. Traveling emissaries bring fantastic reports of the miraculous Sabbatai Zevi to the eager, incredulous townspeople:

Wonders and miracles are performed in Jerusalem. . . . In Miron a fiery column has been seen stretching from earth to heaven. . . . The full name of God and of Sabbatai Zevi were scratched on it in black. . . . The women who divine by consulting drops of oil have seen the crown of King David on Sabbatai Zevi's head. . . . Many disbelievers deny this and refuse to turn back at the very threshold of Gehenna. . . . Woe unto them! They will sink and be lost in the nethermost circle of Sheol! (Satan, 42).

Sabbatai Zevi's growing popularity, the fierce loyalty of his supporters and the virtual silence of his antagonists--largely due to the violence and threats of his followers--illustrate Nathan of Gaza's success. Today he would have had a much harder time promoting his "candidate." The basic lack of communication in the seventeenth century substantially aided in his triumph. It is not difficult to understand the credulity of the isolated villagers. In Goray there are no newspapers, no television. Mordecai Joseph, Goray's greatly prejudiced "foreign correspondent," as we shall see, can easily be doubted and even silenced for a time. There is no proof. Letters touting visions, rumors and dreams as truth, are the only means of spreading news. No one knows what is happening anywhere else in the world. Isolation is the curse that causes the growth of the sect.

As Goray attempts to rebuild itself, Rabbi Benish, who

stands for orthodox Jewish law, as Rabbi Ozer did in "The Gentleman from Cracow," is forced to retreat further and further into obscurity. He cannot even control the dissension in his own household, let alone the conflict in the town. While he worries about "faith, predestination and freedom of will, and the suffering of the virtuous,"-- Singer's own concerns in the novel--evil is taking over in the shape of new heroes preening themselves in Sabbatai Zevi's shadow: Itche Mates, the packman, Mordecai Joseph, the crippled Kabbalist, and Reb Gedaliya, the new town slaughterer (Satan, 17). Rabbi Benish bemoans the fact that "Polish Jewry was taking the wrong path. They delved too deeply into things that were meant to be hidden, they drank too little from the clear waters of the holy teachings" (Satan, 23). He bans Kabbalistic books, refuses to allow visiting Sabbatians to talk to the townspeople; but he is visibly shaken, losing control. His own son, Levi, is the leader of the heretical movement in Goray. Evil is in the air. The people of Goray are frightened of "the new terror whose shadow was slowly deepening over the town" (Satan, 114). Events reach a shrieking, momentary halt at the betrothal feast of Rechele and Itche Mates during which men and women are seen dancing together, locked in a sinful embrace, for hours. In a futile attempt to put an end to this latest heresy, Rabbi Benish, weak and ill, rushes outside to stop them. He is found, hours later, half-frozen, in the

snow. Almost dead, he begs to be transported to Lublin, thereby forsaking his congregation. Traditional religion is found inadequate in this time of crisis; retreating, it leaves the Sabbatians unchallenged and alone, in full power now. Satan has arrived.

. . .night fell, and, with it came a frost more bitter than any the old folks could remember. Water froze in the well, and the pail cracked. An ice hill formed up to the very rim of the well, and it was dangerous to go near it, for one false step was enough to send one over the edge. Though the ovens were heated in every house, small children in their cribs cried with the cold. As always on a night like this, there were numerous accidents and evil afflictions. Infants would suddenly begin to choke, lose their breath, and turn blue. Girls put on men's jackets, bundled up in double layers of shawls, and went seeking women who could avert the evil eye by incantations. . . (Satan, 116-117).

Torn between the excesses of indulgence and asceticism of the Sabbatians is Rechele who "had been born in 1648, a few weeks before the massacre" (Satan, 55). Her life is obviously an attempt to parallel the Jewish experience encircled by the dual horrors of Chmielnicki and Sabbatai Zevi. Raised in the house of her uncle, a slaughterer, Rechele's earliest memories are of blood and death. She grows up in fear, haunted by superstitious stories, frequent beatings, ignorance and loneliness. Her father, Reb Eleazar Babad, once the wealthiest citizen of Goray, takes her back with him when the town is being resettled, but he disappears soon after without explanation, and she is left virtually orphaned once more. The nightmarish experiences of her

youth have left her slightly demented, but in her madness is a certain clear-sightedness which is lacking in the rest of the townspeople. When Itche Mates, an ascetic Sabbatian who indulges in endless self-mortification, arrives in Goray, he is bewitched by Rechele's beauty and defiance.

. . .he glanced at her out of the corner of his wide-set eyes, browless and cool green, like those of a fish. Rechele's long braids were undone, like a witch's, full of feathers and straw. One half of her face was red, as though she had been lying on it, the other half was white. She was barefoot, and wore a torn red dress, through which parts of her body shone. In her left hand she held an earthen pot, in her right a straw whisk with ashes in it. Through her disheveled hair a pair of frantic eyes smiled madly at him (Satan, 75).

Rechele senses the evil hiding behind his mask of piety. When he decides to marry her, she cries out and begs to be spared: "I'm so afraid of him! . . . He has dead eyes!" (Satan, 83). But the women of the town do not give her credit for occasional bursts of lucidity; they deem her lucky to be chosen, not only an orphan but mad as well. The preparations for her wedding are undertaken without her participation; she sits passively, withdrawing into herself.

Her bridegroom, Itche Mates, is considered a holy man by the town which is greatly impressed by his excessive fasting, hours of sitting with his feet in a bucket of icy water and mysterious mumbling. On his wedding day, he is "surrounded by the faithful, who attended his every word. There was even one young cabalist who wrote down whatever

Reb Itche Mates said" (Satan, 122). Itche Mates, in his exaggerated, outward rites of mortification--for all to see and marvel at--embodies the split between exterior and interior realities that is the true subject of Satan in Goray. For him faith is a matter of self-denial and self-torture, a concept that runs counter to all Jewish teachings. His dream of the coming glory of the Messianic Era reflects his yearning for a spiritual, completely body-less existence.

Bodies would become pure spirit. From the World of Emanations and from under the Throne of Glory new souls would descend. There would be no more eating and drinking. Instead of being fruitful and multiplying, beings would unite in combinations of holy letters. The Talmud wouldn't be studied. Of the Bible only the secret essence would remain (Satan, 73).

This mystical, cerebral universe reduced to essences, in which union between holy letters replaces human procreation, is echoed in Itche Mates' own unconsummated marriage. He sees Lilith, the original demon-witch, in Rechele while she suffocates from his overwhelming, unseductive body smell "of bathhouse water and corpses" (Satan, 133).

Before the wedding comes a letter from the Rabbi of Lublin to Rabbi Benish containing a warning about one Itche Mates, a notorious false prophet who makes sacrifices to Satan and who has a habit of marrying young girls and then deserting them. The Rabbi of Lublin entreats Rabbi Benish to "tear the veil from his face," but the warning about Itche Mates' true nature arrives too late to that isolated

outpost of civilization, Goray (Satan, 92). The townspeople refuse to believe in the sinfulness of such a pious-seeming man, and Rabbi Benish is soon forced to leave the town. No one remains to prevent the townspeople from being swayed yet once more--this time by the arrival of the new town slaughterer, Reb Gedaliya, another man who is not what he seems. Singer, in this novel, wants the reader to grow aware of the unreality of external appearances; therefore, he subjects him to a deception that echoes the characters' experience. The reader witnesses a phenomenon of mass hypnotism--the selling of a Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi, and his disciples--perhaps similar to the Nazi movement and the brainwashing practiced in modern cults, but he is not permitted to feel superior to the deluded people of Goray; he, too, is confused and can no longer distinguish between good and evil. The Sabbatians, adhering to their philosophy which can be briefly summed up as "Tov Milgar Ubish (outwardly evil, inwardly virtuous)," have intensified the tenuousness of the external world (Satan, 197). Gershom Scholem expands on the bewildering experience of shifting realities which is an inherent part of Sabbatian thought.

To the Sabbatians all reality became dialectically unreal and contradictory. Their own experience led them to the idea of an existence in³ permanent contradiction with itself. . . .

After a while the distinction between outer evil and inner goodness must necessarily become blurred. A religion basing

itself solely on mysticism--which is itself composed of a series of acute individual revelations--is bound to confuse not only the masses but its own practitioners. Mysticism which attempts to divorce itself from the diluting, disciplinary effects of religion cannot hope to survive; rootless, it is without foundation and therefore, without a future. Each self-styled prophet is free to announce his own version of reality whether or not it conflicts with others.

The reader himself must attempt to echo the Rabbi of Lublin's plea to "tear the veil" from all faces in an effort to determine the truth. The Sabbatians with their obscure, baffling vision of life have only added to the basic problem which, for Singer, is distinguishing between good and evil, and especially evil masking itself as good. The reader's task is further complicated by his own "will to believe" which is a result of Singer's art of storytelling. In "The Gentleman from Cracow," we wanted to believe, with the villagers, in the legendary stranger who came miraculously to save them from poverty and ruin, and in Satan in Goray, we yearn, with the citizens of Goray, for an end to the exile and misery of the Jews which the coming of Sabbatai Zevi seems to promise. It is quite easy upon a first reading of both the tale and the novel to dismiss Singer's clues revealing the inner evil of the alleged messiahs. Reb Gedaliya, as we shall see, plays as skillful a game in Goray as the young gentleman in "The Gentleman

from Cracow" did in Frampol, managing to blind an entire town for quite a long time.

Reb Gedaliya's appearance seems to herald dawn after the Jews' long night.

Reb Gedaliya was a welcome newcomer to the citizens of Goray, and he revived their declining spirits. His arrival was a sign that the town would rise again. The Sabbatai Zevi sect immediately forgot the melancholy Itche Mates, and entrusted their leadership to Reb Gedaliya (Satan, 143).

The people are soothed by his sensuous, jovial nature. With him joy becomes almost a religion in itself: "he hated sadness, and his way of serving God was through joy" (Satan, 149). His easy-going, careless attitude toward strict observance of the law is a delight at first, an omen of a more lenient, compassionate age. His sermons are filled with gentle admonitions to be fruitful and multiply, thereby hastening the redemption.

. . .when the end of days was come, not only would Rabbi Gershom's ban on polygamy become null and void, but all the strict 'thou shalt nots,' as well. Every pious woman would then be as fair as Abigail, and there would be no monthly flow of blood at all; for impure blood comes from the Evil One. Men would be permitted to know strange women. Such encounters might even be considered a religious duty; for each time a man and a woman unite they form a mystical combination and promote a union between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Divine Presence. Reb Gedaliya explained all these things in a pleasant way and with many parables. . .(Satan, 147-8).

A cunning politician, Reb Gedaliya sugar-coats his message, he gives the people what they want: lazy morals and

forgiveness; he encourages them to live as though it is the end of the world. A miracle worker, he performs magical deeds that awe the citizens of Goray. With the use of amulets and mystical formulations, he cures the ill. Like Zevi, he is a legendary, larger-than-life character, one who seems--according to reports and from a distance--destined and worthy to be "King of the Jews." The townspeople and the reader can easily be fooled by Reb Gedaliya's apparent kindness and generosity; his skill at dissimulation is such that we echo the Jews of the seventeenth century who were deluded by the false Messiah: "In this hour of eclipse they seemed to be dazzled" (Satan, 179). Singer's portrait of Gedaliya, the false Messiah of Goray, is Dorian Gray-ish; we do not perceive the spreading evil and corruption until it has completely overtaken him and those around him. Indeed the whole novel, as has been pointed out, constantly circles about the lesson not to judge hastily and to mistrust appearances. Although we are given clues that lead us to suspect Gedaliya's inner venom, it is easy to dismiss them as casually as he dispatches the animals he slaughters: "Hurry! It's clean! It's clean!" (Satan, 172). There is of course the fact uncovered later that Gedaliya has never once judged an animal unclean, unkosher--allied to his suspiciously friendly relationship with the gentile butchers. But his charisma and his magnetic, magical sense of joy, are so alluring that one would prefer not to believe

in his vileness.

In the midst of Gedaliya's reign, Rechele becomes a prophetess. Voices speak to her in praise of Sabbatai Zevi and his worthy disciple, Reb Gedaliya. Gedaliya, seduced by her haunting, other-worldly beauty and her flattering visions, takes her as wife, conveniently sending Itche Mates and Mordecai Joseph on a mission to inform the world of Rechele's miraculous prophetic powers which confirm Sabbatai Zevi's claims. With Itche Mates gone, Reb Gedaliya and Rechele rule over their tiny, lascivious empire. The battle between the sacred and the profane rages on within Rechele. She is the living embodiment of the phenomenon, vibrating to each turn of events. She was left fatherless, an orphan in the storm, as were the people of Goray when Rabbi Benish abandoned them. She swayed with them from their allegiance to the spiritual Ariel, Itche Mates, to their degradation under the leadership of the fleshy, earthy Caliban, Reb Gedaliya. Both extremes: body-lessness and mind-lessness, lead directly into Satan's outstretched arms. A certain bestiality seems to have overtaken Goray, sneaking up on the town, catching the people unaware, in the form of their leader, Gedaliya, who with his "thick growth of hair covering his body like a fur coat," encourages them to live like animals, devouring all they physically desire.

Only a few individuals did not join in but stood apart watching Satan dance in the streets.

And the deeds of the Faithful were truly an abomination. It was reported that the sect assembled at a secret meeting place every night; extinguishing the candles, they would lie with each other's wives. Reb Gedaliya was said to have secreted a whore sent him by the sect in Samosc somewhere in his house without the knowledge of his wife, Rechele. A copper cross hung on his breast, under the fringed vest, and an image lay in his breast pocket. At night Lilith and her attendants Namah and Machlot visited him, and they consorted together. Sabbath eve, dressing in scarlet garments and a fez, like a Muslim, he accompanied his disciples to the ruins of the old castle near Goray. There Samael presented himself to them, and they all prostrated themselves together before a clay image. Then they danced in a ring with torches in their hands. Rabbi Joseph de la Reina, the traitor, descended from Mount Seir to join them in the shape of a black dog. Afterward, as the legend went, they would enter the castle vaults and feast on flesh from the living--rending live fowl with their hands, and devouring the meat with the blood. When they had finished feasting, fathers would know their daughters, brothers their sisters, sons their mothers. . . .
(Satan, 200-201).

Witchcraft and paganism are only the beginning of Goray's descent into sin. Cruelty, thievery and rape are common. But Gedaliya's most unpardonable offense comes when he convinces the entire town that the Messianic Era has arrived, pushing the people to ignore today and to live breathlessly for tomorrow when they shall be reinstated as the rulers of Israel. It is clear how this wistful, Messianic dreaming led to the birth of Zionism, a desire to return to the Jewish homeland and seat of their early grandeur; at this point in time, however, for the people of Goray, it is

a tragedy--one that has been repeated countless times in different Jewish communities during the long history of the Exile.

As the month of Elul approached, the faith of the people of Goray grew stronger. Shopkeepers no longer kept shop, artisans suspended their labors. It seemed useless to complete anything. Now the people ate only food that did not need preparation and was easy to obtain. Since they were too slothful to gather firewood in the forest, they acquired the habit of heating their ovens with the lumber they had available. By winter they would be settled in Jerusalem. And so they tore down fences and outhouses for kindling. Some even ripped the shingles from their roofs. Many refused to undress when they retired at night. The awaited cloud might come when they were asleep, and they did not wish to be forced to dress in a hurry. . . (Satan, 174-5).

Satan's power is at its zenith; the will to believe has reached its peak.

The bitter aftermath, when the Messiah fails to appear, and the townspeople are left virtually homeless, without food, in rags, is a harsh return to reality.

. . .at dusk the town grew so still one might have thought that everyone had died. The air turned blue, like the pages of an old book, the houses were drab, half in ruins, and it seemed like the year 1648 (Satan, 184).

Only now, after their spiritual death, do the people of Goray grow conscious of the parallel between the massacres of Chmielnicki and their own suicidal will to believe which has led them to abandon reality for a dream. A torrent of rain falls for three days and three nights, further

destroying their illusions and their houses. Frightened of what seems a series of plagues from God, they huddle together and wait. Their children die from eating too much meat (thanks to the indiscriminating slaughterer) and not enough bread. It seems as though Goray will be "erased" once more--for the last time.

Adding to the horror is the return of the bedraggled wanderers, Itche Mates and Mordecai Joseph, previously the two most outspoken defenders of Sabbatai Zevi, with startling news. Zevi was given a choice by the Sultan: either to undergo the death of a martyr (and thereby prove his cause) or to convert to Islam. Faced with his own ethical decision, Zevi chose to convert. As a Muslim, his new name is Mohammed Bashi. "Sabbatai Pig kneels before idols," screams Mordecai Joseph to a shocked crowd (Satan, 193).

All of the congregation bowed their shoulders, as under a heavy burden. They looked exactly as they had that day in the year 1648 when messengers brought them the evil news that Cossacks and Tartars encircled Goray (Satan, 192-3).

Itche Mates and Mordecai Joseph condemn Gedaliya who hurriedly orders all holy books burned; only the Kabbalah can remain. The town is split in two: the Faithful and their opponents. The Faithful maintain that Zevi descended into Islam only in order to redeem the holy sparks lodged in that "impure" religion; it was his own brand of martyrdom,

his fate, to eternally fall into the depths of evil for the good of his people and to be cursed for it. A number of Sabbatians follow their leader and themselves outwardly convert to either Islam or Christianity. Secretly, however, they continue their inversions of Jewish law.

In Goray desecration of holy texts and houses of worship, corruption and black magic abound. Rechele's sacred visions cease after Zevi's conversion; she is visited by Satan who impregnates her. Her body swells; she suffers mysterious, horrible ailments; she vomits foul creatures--until the final indignity: she is invaded by a dybbuk, an evil spirit that takes possession of her. Reb Gedaliya, fearful and ashamed, tries to hide from the people of Goray who mock him and his "holy prophetess." The dybbuk is ultimately exorcised, but not before he has revealed destructive truths in rhyme about all the townspeople. Immediately upon the dybbuk's departure from her body, the poor Rechele dies, having been heavily overburdened with a symbolism her frail body could not withstand.

Satan in Goray is a cautionary tale, a warning couched in beautiful language, to beware the dangerous, seductive "will to believe." In her madness Rechele sees the truth--symbolic and enlarged--while Gedaliya, keeper of myths, tries to twist the meanings of what she sees, turning evil into good.

With perfect clarity she saw that the dark house was crowded with evil things, insane beings running hither and thither, hopping as on hot coals, quivering and swaying. . . . Reb Gedaliya spat three times, and searched every corner of the room for some sign of the visitations. His large hands trembled; perspiration dripped from his body to Rechele's featherbed, and he shouted as though she were hard of hearing:
 'Wake up! Rechele! Don't be afraid! Thou hast seen a goodly vision! A goodly vision hast thou seen! Goodly is the vision thou hast seen!' (Satan, 210).

The will to believe leads one to transform the truth in order to fabricate a more harmonious reality. The Zohar, the central text of the Kabbalah, calls the Jews and those who never cease to search for God, deeper meanings to existence, etc., "children from the chamber of yearning." There are times, however, when it would be better to be a child of truth than a child of yearning. The Zohar itself is a flowery, wistful, hopeful allegory playing on the hidden desires of the Jews. Its author, Moses de Leon, depicts the Jew as a high priest, a king, one whose actions affect the entire universe. The contrast between his noble presence in the pages of the Zohar and the actuality of the Jew's existence in the real world where he was miserable, poor and persecuted is so extreme one can easily understand the importance the Zohar and other similar mystical texts had for the Jews. The Kabbalah provided them with a dream world that allowed them to disregard the grimness and utter hopelessness of their lives. A work as sublime and emotionally

uplifting as the Zohar may very well have meant survival for the Jews during periods of crisis, massacres, pogroms, when a more fervent spiritual outlet was needed than logical, rational Judaism could provide. It is nonetheless true that the Zohar alone, or the Kabbalah alone, is a travesty of religion--as is demonstrated by Gedaliya's burning all books save those dealing with the Kabbalah--leading the believer to harmful excesses that may inflict as much destruction as a pogrom.

The dream of the Messianic Era is one that sustained the Jews during two thousand years of Exile. The Jews who were seduced by Zevi's false Messiah-ship were tempted by the thought that they could live for the dream alone, no need to struggle with harsh reality, forget today: tomorrow was already here. And in the depths of their longings, each Jew saw in Sabbatai Zevi the personification of the end of their misery and the beginning of the fulfillment of their dream. Gedaliya, like all the others, looks into the future as though it were a pool, and Narcissus-like, sees himself and his desires therein reflected.

Every godfearing man would have ten thousand heathen slaves to wash his feet and care for him. Duchesses and princesses would act as the nurses and governesses of Jewish children The afflicted would be healed, the ugly made beautiful. Everyone would eat from golden dishes and drink only wine. The daughters of Israel would bathe in streams of balsam, and the fragrance of their bodies would suffuse the world. . . (Satan, 174).

Who--or what--is Satan? At least one aspect of Satan is the delusion of the Jews that the coming of the Messiah will bring about the actualization of his own personal utopia--for Reb Gedaliya, a harem washing his feet, for Itche Mates, fornicating letters, and for the majority of the people of Goray, "a spiritual deliverance that would change the whole world, root out all evil, and bring the kingdom of Heaven to earth" (Boy, 1). But dreams do not materialize effortlessly. And the will to believe is often more harmful than beneficial: it kills the truth. Perhaps for all of us, Satan is a mask which, when torn away, reveals a mirror: we create our own evil.

Satan in Goray is Singer's powerful illustration of the havoc wreaked upon the Jews by their will to believe that their suffering was over and that the Messianic Era had indeed begun. The will to believe, that desperate outlet of the Jews' fervent Messianic yearnings, will reach its tragic finale in the greatest threat they have yet to face: the Holocaust. As we shall see in Chapter V, the Jewish will to believe serves as both a saving grace and a destructive folly to a people for whom survival is the ultimate value. It murders the Jews who refuse to believe in the veracity of Hitler's threats to erase them from the earth and who therefore remain planted in Eastern Europe, like sheep awaiting slaughter. After the Holocaust, however, the will to believe resurfaces as a sign of nobility, strength and vitality in

a dying people who simply refuse to die and who still, despite all the odds against them, believe in their unique role in world history: from the concentration camps, a great number of them march directly to Israel where they resurrect their faith once more.

NOTES

¹Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 139.

²Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken, 1977), p. 293.

³Ibid., p. 324.

Chapter V

"DANCERS UPON GRAVES"

Once upon a time there was a king who knew that the next harvest would be cursed. Whosoever would eat from it would go mad. And so he ordered an enormous granary built and stored there all that remained from the last crop. He entrusted the key to his friend and this is what he told him: 'When my subjects and their king will have been struck with madness, you alone will have the right to enter the storehouse and eat uncontaminated food. Thus you will escape the malediction. But in exchange, your mission will be to cover the earth, going from country to country, from town to town, from one street to the other, from one man to the other, telling tales, ours--and you will shout with all your might: Good people, do not forget! What is at stake is your life, your survival! Do not forget, do not forget!'

Nowhere does the Jewish "will to believe" show itself so painfully inadequate in dealing with reality, and paradoxically so noble an expression of human strength, as in confronting the Holocaust. The mere concept of Hitler's plan to annihilate the Jews, the precepts of which were

carried out willingly enough by his countrymen, transfixes the mind, stretches the limits of the imagination until they snap and break. It is too much for the human brain to conceive. According to Saul Bellow,

The Holocaust may even be seen as a deliberate lesson or project in philosophical redefinition: 'You religious and enlightened people, you Christians, Jews, and Humanists, you believers in freedom, dignity, and enlightenment--you think that you know what a human being is. We will show you what he is, and what you are. Look at our camps and crematoria and see if you can bring your hearts to care about these millions.'

And it is obvious that the humanistic civilized moral imagination is inadequate. Confronted with such a 'metaphysical' demonstration, it despairs and declines from despair into lethargy and sleep.²

Singer's two novels that confront the Holocaust from before and after, Enemies and Shosha, contain his darkest, bleakest, most pessimistic visions of the world. The characters of Shosha, Warsaw Jews on the eve of Apocalypse, attempt to ignore the future by indulging in hedonistic, momentary pleasures. "There is no tomorrow!" they cry, "only today!" They cannot believe in the magnitude of the approaching terror. They dance to the lurid flames of Hitler's ovens. Enemies takes place several years later in New York City. Its characters, more dead than alive, are the survivors of the Holocaust; their task, to begin again. Some of them show unparalleled grandeur of spirit as they continue to believe wholeheartedly in God while mourning for their departed families and comrades. Others, rancorous

and unforgiving, claim that God Himself is the Supreme Nazi, delighting in the torture and slaughter of Jews; hence, they find no hope, no point, in either living or dying. Still others want only to forget the misery and inhumanity they endured; absorbing themselves in a frantic social, business whirl, they pretend there was no yesterday.

The sheer impossibility of coming to terms with the shame and brutality of the Holocaust does not by any means provide a rationale for forgetting. "Amnesia is a dangerous malaise for the human spirit," cautions Singer. "For the people of Israel whose entire survival is based on remembering, amnesia is fatal."³ The Jews who hope that ignoring the past is a method of erasing it are doomed to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors. By the same token, the West German school children of today who study censored history books with no mention of the horrors their parents and grandparents perpetrated are likely to echo them; the rise of neo-Nazi groups in Germany is proof that those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it. Singer sees history as a warning to Jews not to settle themselves too comfortably in their borrowed countries--or even in Israel: anti-Semitism and the will to destroy all Jews simmer beneath the earth's surface. No matter who or where they are, Jews live on the edge of a perpetually bubbling volcano, ready at any moment, upon the slightest provocation, to erupt. Security of existence is unknown to them; they are

constantly on the brink of permanent destruction. In the words of Saul Bellow, "the Jews, because they are Jews, have never been able to take the right to live as a natural right."⁴

The whys and wherefores of anti-Semitism can be explored ad infinitum and nevertheless result in no real clarification. The anti-Semites populating Singer's world exhibit the fundamental characteristics that form the basis of all prejudice: a willingness to judge by hearsay, ignorance and a lack of responsibility that make it easier to blame the scapegoat than oneself. Lucian, in The Manor, blames the Jews for imposing morality and commandments on the rest of the world: "In our times there's so much that's forbidden," he complains. "Don't do this, don't do that. It's our legacy from the Jews" (Manor, 219). Lucian's reaction seems to point to the validity of Freud's theory--upheld by a variety of theologians and philosophers, including Jacques Maritain--that the world's hatred of Jews is in truth a hatred for the original source of the monotheistic, moralistic Christianity which was foisted upon them. The Jews serve as pinpricks in the conscience of the world. They also function as the world's eternal scapegoats; whenever politics sour or the economy runs dry, cherchez le juif. Anti-Semitism is so widespread and deeply-rooted a belief, containing so virulent a hatred for those who have the gall to call themselves "the chosen people" that it

appears impossible to withstand. "Well, what has he chosen for you?" sneers one of Singer's characters who proceeds to answer his own question: "To live in dark ghettos and wear yellow patches" (Slave, 174). To destroy anti-Semitism seems an insurmountable task; yet miraculously, mysteriously, in spite of the world's hatred, the Jews are still here. Survival, insists Singer, is the greatest revenge on those who wish your extinction. The Jew who was spared, instead of evading his painful past, must gather his courage, roll up his sleeves, echo Singer: "Although I did not have the privilege of going through the Hitler holocaust. . ." and confront the horrorhead on (Enemies, Author's note). Singer chides those who feel this is a morbid dwelling on the past; on the contrary, it can mean the difference between death and life. It is a matter of urgency for the contemporary Jew and non-Jew to always remember the Holocaust in order to assure its never happening again. Elie Wiesel, who survived, echoes Singer also, with these words from his brief, haunting factual novel, Night.

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those

moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.⁵

"Hanka," from one of Singer's most brilliant collections of stories, Passions, is one of his numerous tales dealing with the aftermath of the Holocaust. The first person narrator, a successful middle-aged writer in America, undertakes a lecture tour to Argentina where, ironically, he encounters the ghosts of his Polish childhood in the shape of relatives who survived the Nazi tortures. They are haunting examples of what Singer calls the "Hitler sickness," the will to die that comes from having faced death too often. Unable to extinguish the burning memory of the Holocaust, they have exchanged a literal grave for a symbolic one. "I belong to an exterminated tribe," Hanka tells him (Passions, 11). Hanka is a relative of his Aunt Yentl's--as fact and fiction intertwine--that irrepressible, gossipy story-teller from Singer's childhood who recounts some of his most fantastic tales. The complacent narrator, undeterred by the death in Hanka's eyes, attempts to seduce her. She responds, "You are a normal person, not a necrophile" (Passions, 11). Aware that he does not yet comprehend the extent of the unutterable horror she has undergone, she takes him to visit his distant cousin, Jechiel, now known as Julio, in the suburbs of Buenos Aires.

Jechiel/Julio and his wife, both survivors of

concentration camps, blue numbers blazing on their arms, are expressionless vegetables, more like "stuffed doll[s]" than human beings (Passions, 21). Anguished, the author-narrator seeks an explanation for "this numb couple" (Passions, 22). Hanka bitterly informs him that "whoever has loved death cannot love anything else any more" (Passions, 14). He begins to understand that Hanka is indeed his own Angel of Death. The ghosts in her dead eyes deflate his rootless security and success. She is a "na-v'nad--a fugitive and a wanderer," she tells him, one who has been "torn away like a leaf from a tree and no power can attach you again" (Passions, 11). A deadly Cassandra, she describes the endless cycle of Jewish suffering.

Here they believe that the Jewish state will end our misfortunes once and forever. This is sheer optimism. We are surrounded there by hordes of enemies whose aim is the same as Hitler's--to exterminate us. Ten times they may not succeed--but the eleventh, catastrophe. I see the Jews being driven into the sea. I hear the wailing of the women and the children. Why is suicide considered such a sin? My own felling is that the greatest virtue would be to abandon the body and all its iniquities (Passions, 17).

She disappears soon after and the narrator is left alone to recall her visions and prophecy. "Why did you run away?" he calls out to her. "Wherever you are, come back. There can be no world without you. You are an eternal letter in God's scroll" (Passions, 24). Hanka never returns save in the narrator's hallucinations, yet he knows he will never

be able to forget her or what she stands for; she is frequently "reincarnated" as a character in Singer's stories.

In Shosha, we are able to examine the sources of the suffering and death-wish of survivors like Hanka and Jechiel. The characters in Shosha attempt to hide from the dawning horror of Hitler; each in his own way seeks refuge from the painful, bewildering events of the present. I find the novel's original Yiddish title, Soul Expeditions, far more evocative and meaningful than Shosha, its English title. All the characters in Shosha take "soul expeditions" attempting to flee their Jewish destiny; the name "Shosha," however, refers only to Aaron Greidinger's method of escape. While their souls flee, their bodies sadly remain rooted in Warsaw, awaiting death. Shosha is a soul expedition for Singer himself who offers an artist's alternative to fate. The protagonist, Aaron Greidinger, is Singer in his youth as a struggling writer in Warsaw. Aaron not only shares Singer's book-loving mother and pious young brother, he also lives at the same address and even takes on the unlikely nickname, Tsutsik (which bears a resemblance to the name, Isaac, but which seems incongruous when applied to Aaron). The characters are familiar to the readers of Singer's tales: the cynical, charming revolutionaries and lechers of the Warsaw Writer's Club. The mixture of truth and fiction is intriguing and probably "truer" to Singer than his own past is; interestingly, it is his only novel in English told in

the first person. The most successful moments in Shosha convey a feeling of tension, of danger and risk shared by the author on a tightrope, carrying possibility to its imaginative limit, and his breathless reader. Singer plays with the known elements in his life, the basic facts comprising his autobiography, and transforms them into the unknown. One of his greatest qualities as a writer is his fearlessness; he is uninhibited by what really happened, by the confines of actuality. The most important change he makes in rewriting his past is that Aaron remains in Warsaw several years longer than Singer himself did, and therefore, comes in direct contact with the Holocaust.

Soul expeditions seem to refer not only to modes of escape, occult visitations, and hypnotic communication between kindred souls but to the Kabbalistic concept of gilgul as well. Gilgul, or the transmigration of souls, is an important facet of the Kabbalah which, as we saw in Chapter IV, deals in large part with mystical answers to the problem of Jewish suffering. Not only are the Jews in exile, but their souls are, too. It is all part of the great process of tikkun, or restoration. As tikkun is a consolatory explanation of the Jewish exile--the Jews are forced to voyage throughout the world in order to seek impure sparks that only they can redeem and thereby hasten the Messiah's coming--so is gilgul, in a manner of speaking, a wistful interpretation of Jewish misery on earth. In this

theory of metempsychosis, the soul itself is exiled, condemned to wander from body to body until it reaches perfection. Ibbur is the impregnation that results when a wandering soul enters a waiting body; a dybbuk is an evil ibbur. Gilgul is a cycle of spiritual reincarnation in which souls endlessly strive for divinity. "The past generations are our dybbuks," cries Betty Slonim, a boyish, emaciated American actress trying to succeed in Warsaw's Yiddish theatre. "A person is literally a cemetery where multitudes of living corpses are buried" (Shosha, 213). Betty herself bears traces of the heroine of Aaron's play, the "maiden from Ludmir," a historical-legendary woman who wanted to study Torah like a man and who is the precursor of Singer's own "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy." Morris Feitelzohn, the charismatic libertine, is reminiscent of the false Messiahs, Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank, whose biographies Aaron is writing. Shosha herself could be the reincarnation of the dead child of a hedonistic couple, Haiml and Celia. And Aaron is of course Singer with his conflicting desires. He loves sex but is ashamed of his lust. He questions everything about God and the Torah, yet despite his skepticism, he cannot leave his religion entirely behind. He wants to write for the world, yet he persists in writing in Yiddish which is almost universally acknowledged to be a dying language. He drifts from woman to woman, not knowing what he is seeking--until one day, by chance, he

finds himself back in his past, on Krochmalna Street (where In My Father's Court takes place). There he encounters Shosha, his childhood friend who alone, in mad, frenzied Warsaw, seems to have retained the wonder and simplicity of youth.

Resurrected as if in a dream, Shosha is an adult who has remained a child. She is virtually unchanged--even to the clothes she wears. Aaron, captivated by her innocence and honesty, hopes to recapture the past through her. To the bewilderment and shock of his sophisticated friends, he marries her. They do not understand that only with Shosha can Aaron/Singer remain a boy still living at 10 Krochmalna Street in Warsaw, with loving parents and family and friends in the eternal magic garden of childhood. Ironically, it is Shosha alone with her limited intelligence who can penetrate effortlessly into the hidden depths of Aaron's soul where he is still the child he was. With her he can ignore the grim shadows of the outside world--Hitler, money, disillusionment. . .and can delight in confiding his dreams and thoughts.

I elaborated to Shosha the theory that world history was a book man could read only forward. He could never turn the pages of this world book backward. But everything that had ever been still existed. . . . The hens, geese, and ducks the butchers in Yanash's Court slaughtered each day still lived, clucked, quacked, and crowed on the other pages of the world book--the right-hand pages, since the world book was written in Yiddish, which reads

from right to left.

Shosha caught her breath. 'Will we live in No. 10?'

'Yes, Shoshele, on the other pages of the book we still live in No. 10.'

'But different people have moved in.'

'They live there on the open pages, not the closed ones.'

'Mommy once said that before we moved in, a tailor used to live there.'

'The tailor lives there, too.'

'Everyone together?'

'Each in another time.'

(Shosha, 241)

Gradually, under the enriching, positive influence of a man's love, Shosha matures slightly; her "primitivism, directness, sincerity," make her a wonderful medium, capable of piercing through layers of reality (Shosha, 242). Her endless fear, however, of "the sky, the stars, the books," is echoed by the other characters in the book who are simultaneously terrified of and paralyzed by the approaching reign of terror (Shosha, 234). The exaggerated fear of childhood gives way to reality in pre-Hitler Warsaw.

Shosha's characters live in an era the poet Bialik called "between the suns." They are a transitional generation, born after the setting sun of one world and afraid of the rising sun of the next. Their old world--traditions, faith and communal identity examined in The Manor and The Estate--has yielded to the horrors of The Family Moskat--but in Shosha, viewed until the final moments of the destruction. Shosha's people are loud, colorful, feverish hedonists who live desperately in the present, unlike the traditional Jews who seem to live in the past and

the future. As Haiml says, "If there is no merciful truth, I take the lie that gives me warmth and moments of joy" (Shosha, 250). Their precarious existence leaves them nervous, faithless. They have left the God of Moses and Jacob behind, but they find that the Jewish fate is not so easy to evade: "We are running away and Mount Sinai runs after us," exclaims Aaron (Shosha, 262). It seems impossible to avoid the world's hatred and persecution; there is no escape for the Jew, believer or non-believer, devout or assimilated: "Although I had turned away from the Jewish path, I carried the diaspora upon me," sighs a resigned Aaron (Shosha, 253).

Shosha's peculiar power resides in the fact that we witness the frenetic, meaningless antics of the Warsaw Jews in retrospect, through the eyes of Aaron who is recalling those tormented days before the end, trying to understand how and why it happened. It is a fact that the Poles detest the Jews: they regard them as "a nation within a nation, a strange and malignant body. They [the Poles] lack the courage to finish us off themselves, but they wouldn't shed tears if Hitler did it for them" (Shosha, 138). The net is closing in on the Jews. Not knowing which way to turn or where to go, they are agitated, lost, troubled. But they are, at this point, still vibrantly alive in contrast with the ghosts, the remnants of living beings, Hanka and Jechiel, whom we met in "Hanka." Each

character, in a futile attempt to escape the suffering, embarks on his own soul expedition. Aaron's brother, a rabbi, remains untroubled through all the turmoil: all his faith is in God. His mother finds her only solace in reading. Betty Slonim dreams of becoming a great star, a world-famous actress. Celia and Haiml seek sparks of lust and love to enliven a tired marriage: their escape route is via Celia's affairs with Feitelzohn and Aaron. Morris Feitelzohn, the old cynic who wants desperately to believe, revels in a variety of women. Shosha never has to confront reality: she halted her growth and capacity for understanding when it became painful and nightmarish. And Aaron's refuge is, of course, Shosha, "the only woman I can trust," the symbol of eternal childhood (Shosha, 262). The novel ends abruptly, leaving the characters in mid-air, still clutching their dreams of escape as they remain prisoners of the "will to believe," their fundamental incredulity which convinces them that nothing will happen to them, and of an overwhelming apathy and lassitude concerning their own destinies. "We were fated to play our little games and to be crushed," concludes Aaron (Shosha, 265). There was really no way out. A brief epilogue, which we shall look at later, follows.

Enemies is Singer's attempt--startlingly real and unforgettable--to capture the experiences of re-orientation of a small group of survivors in New York City as they try,

after having faced the tortures inflicted on them by the Nazis, to live once more.

In his thoughts, Herman had often likened himself to the Talmudic sage, Choni Hamagol, who according to legend slept for seventy years and when he awoke found the world so strange that he prayed for death (Enemies, 28).

Emerging from their concentration camps, ghettos, haylofts and villages, they see the modern world with the eyes of foreigners, simultaneously dazzled and disgusted by the vulgar, superficial rush of life sweeping past them. Herman Broder, the protagonist of Enemies, spent the Holocaust years hidden in a hayloft, protected and tended by his mother's Polish gentile servant, Yadviga. When the Nazi horrors end, Herman, out of gratitude and perhaps a lethargic will-lessness, weds the illiterate Yadviga, and brings her to New York. His first wife, Tamara, a social revolutionary, enamored of theories and slogans, was shot by the Nazis, as were their two children, David and Yochebed. In New York, Herman falls in love with bitter, neurotic Masha who lives with her mother, Shifrah Puah. Both women underwent the same terrible ordeal at the hands of the Nazis, but their reactions are profoundly different. Shifrah Puah has drawn her cloak of piety tightly around her, devoting her life to prayers and mourning for Hitler's victims. Masha cannot forget either, but her memory is translated into an uncontrollable rage against the whole universe and in particular against its creator:

"Slaughtering Jews is part of nature. Jews must be slaughtered--that's what God wants," she insists (Enemies, 37). She spits on the mezuzah and engages a silent God in an endless, one-sided debate. Masha is blatantly oral: all her nervous tension and impotent anger are concentrated around her mouth. She is always either puffing on a cigarette, chewing gum, swallowing chocolates, drinking Coke, or simply talking. Masha cannot stop talking. Even their love-making takes on the air of a Scheherazade-like ritual during which she spins tales, all leading to the same moral:

that if it had been God's purpose to improve His chosen people by Hitler's persecution, He had failed. The religious Jews had been practically wiped out. The worldly Jews who had managed to escape had, with few exceptions, learned nothing from all the terror (Enemies, 45).

Herman Broder in Coney Island and Masha in the Bronx are, despite their prosaic American surroundings, as deeply imbedded in the gloom of the Hitler era as Hanka and Jechiel. Enemies is Singer's most suicidal book: it takes place in the aftermath of the Holocaust that will seemingly never end in the minds of the survivors and that is always alive somewhere for someone. The Jews who suffered through the nightmare of Hitler will never awaken to see dawn; they are doomed to endure eternal night. There is no end to Auschwitz. For Herman and the other survivors, time is an illusion.

. . .the past is as present as today: Cain continues to murder Abel. Nebuchadnezzar is still slaughtering the sons of Zedekiah and putting out Zedekiah's eyes. The pogrom in Kesheniev never ceases. Jews are forever being burned in Auschwitz. Those without courage to make an end to their existence have only one other way out: to deaden their consciousness, choke their memory, extinguish the last vestige of hope (Enemies, 30).

Suicide is part of what Singer calls the "ethic of protest," perhaps today's only valid form of religion. "If God wants or feels compelled to torture His creatures," he writes in A Little Boy in Search of God, "that is his affair. The true protester expresses his protest by avoiding doing evil to the best of his ability," or more drastically, by "hurling back to God His gift" (Boy, 131, 136). God, the torturer, slaughterer and Grand Nazi Who condoned the senseless, vicious mass murder of His people at the order of one puny madman has failed them. God Himself is on trial in Enemies and Shosha, and the verdict is a resounding GUILTY. God's face is as hidden in Enemies as it was luminous and ever-present in The Slave. We have come a long way from those of Singer's characters who must either serve God or die. In Shosha, the cynic Morris Feitelzohn, a descendant of The Family Moskat's Abram Shapiro, choking on the acrid fumes of the crematoria, describes his own religion of protest. Man is greater than God, he announces, and

true religion. . .was not to serve God but to spite Him. If He wanted evil, we had to aspire to the opposite. If He wanted wars, inquisitions, crucifixions, Hitlers, we must want righteousness, Hasidism, our own version of grace. The Ten Commandments weren't His but ours. God wanted Jews to seize the Land of Israel from the Canaanites and to wage wars against the Philistines, but the real Jew, who began to be what he is in exile, wanted the Gemara with its commentaries, the Zohar, The Tree of Life, The Beginning of Wisdom. The Gentiles didn't drive us into the ghetto. . .the Jew went on his own, because he grew weary of waging war and bringing up warriors and heroes of the battlefield (Shosha, 279).

Man is far more compassionate than God. The four thousand year old reciprocal love between God and the Jews has disintegrated into a relationship between enemies but one which, curiously enough, has as strong a hold on the Jews as the former love did. The truth is that although God seems to have forgotten the Jews, they cannot forget their God. Whether their relationship is one between enemies or lovers, the Jew and God are never strangers. Levi-Yitzhak the Berditcher, the famous Tzaddik known as the Defender, cries to God: "I don't ask You why we are persecuted and massacred in every place and under every pretext, but I would at least like to know whether all our suffering is for You."⁶ There is no answer from God, but the Jew continues to alternately shake his fist at the sky and pray.

Even Herman Broder, in his apparent non-relationship with the "Almighty Sadist," retreats briefly to the traditions of his faith in a vain effort to regain peace of

mind (Enemies, 205). The wise, holy words of the Gemara "were home." On these pages dwelt his parents, his grandparents, all his ancestors" (Enemies, 172). But Herman has moved too far away from the sources of his faith to be able to rest tranquilly within its confines. In Singer's books, it is a matter of "evolution in reverse. The last man on earth will be both a criminal and a madman" (Enemies, 163). Satan in Goray, Singer's first novel, has no "hero," but even the despicable Reb Gedaliya is larger than life, impressive in the extent of his depravity. Shosha, his latest novel, has, as we have seen, only Aaron Greidinger, a dulled, refracted portrait of the author himself, who, trying to escape the torment of Jewish existence, marries a mentally retarded girl for whom time stands still. One has only to compare Jacob of The Slave or Yasha of The Magician of Lublin with Herman Broder, the danging "mechanical man" of Enemies, Singer's next to last novel, to grow aware of the gradual spiritual and emotional disintegration of his protagonists. It is only fair, however, to point out that the earlier characters inhabit a realm uncorroded by the destructive elements of the Holocaust. Terrible as the pogroms and massacres they have witnessed are, Herman Broder and Aaron Greidinger have lived through a worse horror, an evil so immense and broad in its implications that it has altered the face of history. Humanity will never again be the same: filled with comforting, idealistic

illusions about mankind. As Masha, herself a survivor of the camps, says, "If the Jew is God and the Nazi is God, then there's nothing to talk about" (Enemies, 38). It is the end of the world and there is nothing left to say; the horror has left man speechless.

'Everything has already happened,' Herman thought. 'The creation, the flood, Sodom, the giving of the Torah, the Hitler holocaust.' Like the lean cows of Pharaoh's dream, the present had swallowed eternity, leaving no trace (Enemies, 156).

Surprisingly, this book which is heavy with the weight of the black past that is still alive and hanging over every page is also Singer's funniest novel, rich with true Jewish "gallows" humor. Under New York's desolate grey sky, the half-dead, cynical survivors enact a farce. The actors are totally unsuited to their roles, they mumble their lines and often seem to forget who and where they are, their gloomy faces belie the "comedy of errors" in which they are engaged; the resulting play is a jumble of uneasy torpor and black, macabre humor. Herman Broder, upon the surprise return of his first wife, Tamara, who was injured, not killed, by the Nazi bullets, finds he is a bigamist. As if that were not enough, this man who flees all entanglements, marries the now pregnant Masha at her insistence, and becomes a trigamist. Three wives for modern literature's most unlikely candidate for the role of Don Juan. Herman literally shuns people: "Every human

contact was a potential danger to him" (Enemies, 36). He fears both the Nazis and betrayal of his secret wives. Hence, he makes his way stealthily through the streets of New York and the modern world, trying to hide from his enemies: "As Herman walked along, his eye sought hiding places in case the Nazis were to come to New York" (Enemies, 17). Herman is always conscious of man's murderous instincts hiding beneath the thin, superficial veneer of civilization. "Somewhere on this lovely summer morning," he reflects, "fowl were being slaughtered; Treblinka was everywhere" (Enemies, 112). Rabbi Lampert, a successful society rabbi who hires Herman to ghost-write his sermons, scolds him for hiding from the world.

'You're as much a part of this world as the rest of us. You may have been a step away from death a thousand times, but so long as you're alive and eat and walk and, pardon me, go to the toilet, then you're flesh and blood like everyone else. I know hundreds of concentration-camp survivors, some of them were practically on the way to the ovens--they're right here in America, they drive cars, they do business. Either you're in the other world or you're in this world. You can't stand with one foot on the ground and the other in the sky. You're playing a role, that's all (Enemies, 25).

Despite Rabbi Lampert's brusque, shallow dismissal of the pain of the survivors, he has hit on the truth: they are all playing roles--Herman, Masha, Tamara, Shifrah Puah--all the survivors. The irony is that the survivors are dead; they inhabit a twilight world of ghosts. When Tamara

and Herman meet for the first time since before the Holocaust, he is disturbed by their strange, stilted manner: "the spirits of the dead encountered one another in this way, speaking the words of the living, not yet knowing the language of the dead" (Enemies, 69-70). These living corpses who see Hitler's face in every passerby or Nazi terrors in every unexpected occurrence are incapable of living in the modern world that expects them to love, dance and forget. "Whoever has tasted death has no more use for life," says Shifrah Puah (Enemies, 36). Singer's genius lies in trying to fit them--square pegs in round holes--in the customary human activities of love, jealousy, giving birth. . . . What can "courtship" mean to these survivors of rape? What does the concept of "human decency" mean to one who has been forced to live like an animal, who has been compelled to watch his family die? And as for having children, what's the point? In Herman's words, "In a world in which one's children could be dragged away from their mother and shot, one had no right to have more children" (Enemies, 7).

The mere presence of these survivors with haunted eyes is a grim reminder of the acquiescence of the modern world --despite all its talk of progress and civilization--to Hitler's slaughter of six million Jews. For Herman and the others, "the idle promises of progress were no more than a spit in the face of the martyrs of all generations"

(Enemies, 30). These misfits can find no peace, even in the freedom of America. "We came out of Gehenna," exclaims Shifrah Puah, "but Gehenna followed us to America. Hitler has run after us" (Enemies, 184). Herman sidles along, keeping a watch out for Nazis. In cafeterias, he invariably chooses a table near a wall "so that no one could come up behind him" (Enemies, 50). Freedom astounds him; he is still a prisoner, hiding in his hayloft, obsessed with thoughts of how to escape should the Nazis track him down. His devious life, evasions of truth and secretive affairs are evidence of his incapacity to live in the glare of bright sunlight. Like a worm he burrows along, enmeshing himself deeper and deeper in the complexities of his triple life. But Singer is an imaginative writer above all, not simply a chronicler of the sufferings of the Holocaust survivors as they adjust to their new lives. He is quick to point out that he is writing a novel about unique individuals, exceptions to the rule, and that his

characters are not only Nazi victims but victims of their own personalities and fates. If they fit into the general picture, it is because the exception is rooted in the rule. As a matter of fact, in literature the exception is the rule (Enemies, Author's Note).

Herman's situation then, although extreme, is not as rare as it appears to be. Rabbi Lampert informs Tamara "that because of the holocaust, the rabbinate had eased restrictions so that deserted wives could be married a second

time" (Enemies, 280). All human relationships were muddled and turned upside down by the ordeal these people went through. For Masha, lying and infidelity are now second nature: they provided her with a means of survival during the years of darkness; her pregnancy is as false as the oaths she swears. She is self-destructive, consuming herself as she consumes her cigarettes, with guilt, anger and desperation, until she finally commits suicide. Tamara, the one who has suffered the most, reveals the noblest nature: she is perhaps the only character to have really changed because of her experiences. Her children dead, her husband (always wayward and fickle) married to two other women, she is alone. From within herself she gathers the strength to go on. "I am dead," she admits, but she has one hope that neither Masha nor Herman share with her: she has faith in people (Enemies, 77). "Souls exist; it's God who doesn't" (Enemies, 83). It is Tamara who best demonstrates Singer's "ethic of protest," by responding to God's cruelty with human kindness and devotion. She has learned that love is the key, the only foundation for the rebuilding of human lives. She is ready to help everyone--her slogans have given way to heartfelt caring for others--and in the end, it is she who provides the only hope for survival.

Herman, peering out from his eternal hayloft, is suspicious of Tamara and her sudden generosity. Her uncle,

Reb Abraham Nissen, a pious, saintly survivor, gives him his Yiddish book store to help him start a new life. And Tamara pledges herself to be his platonic friend, his guide and mentor. When Yadviga becomes pregnant, it is Tamara who helps her, not Herman. "It was all one great riddle to Herman: Reb Abraham Nissen's trust in him, Tamara's readiness to help him, her devotion to Yadviga" (Enemies, 246). Both Herman and Masha are incapable of self-surrender, of truly reaching out to each other. At the crucial moment in their relationship when Masha insists that he leave the pregnant Yadviga for her, he mutters, "She's my enemy! My enemy! . . . meaning Masha" (Enemies, 255). And when they are on the verge of finally running away together, abandoning everyone who had faith in them, Masha confesses that she cannot leave her mother, Shifrah Puah, now dead, behind.

'Herman, I can't leave my mother,' Masha said quietly.
'You have to leave her anyhow.'
'I want a grave next to hers. I don't want to lie among strangers.'
'You'll lie near me.'
'You're a stranger.'
'Masha, I must go.'
'Wait a second. As long as it is this way, go back to your peasant. Don't leave your child.'
'I will leave everybody,' Herman said
(Enemies, 275).

It is their incapacity for love that proves the ruin of Herman and Masha. Masha commits suicide and Herman disappears, never to be heard from again. Tamara who has taken over the role of breadwinner and companion for

Yadwiga and her child believes that Herman "had either killed himself or was hiding somewhere in an American version of his Polish hayloft" (Enemies, 280). His cruelty to Yadwiga who bears his child and whose goodness and devotion weary him evokes, in small part, the inhumanity of the war years.

"I don't want to forget what we went through," Tamara says firmly (Enemies, 239). It is the memory of the communal sufferings of the Jews that leads her to destroy barriers to communication in an effort to create a real community. If there is no God, then she will act as God should. It is a thin line, however, between remembering the past and being imprisoned by it. Herman and Masha are prisoners. "I'm caught in a vise and can't free myself," admits Herman (Enemies, 144). The survival of the Jews is a miracle that never ceases to fascinate Singer, especially when he considers the Jewish people's conflicting yet equally powerful desires: "our will to live and our will to oblivion."⁷ Tamara is a survivor who has discarded superfluous ideas and theories. "My life seems to have peeled away like the skin of an onion," she says; all that remains is the painful, bitter truth of survival (Enemies, 100). She who watched her children die refuses to acknowledge defeat. She will not marry again--or if she does, it will only be "in the next world--to Herman," but she devotes herself to raising the one living child in the novel, Yadwiga's and

Herman's baby, a girl she and Yadviga name Masha (Enemies, 280). The new Masha will be raised as a Jewish child by her two mothers--the converted Yadviga and the survivor, Tamara. In the new Masha the "will to live" is resurrected.

Herman, however, is the victim of his own "will to oblivion." His philosophy leads him to make a religion out of hiding.

In Herman's private philosophy, survival itself was based on guile. From microbe to man, life prevailed generation to generation by sneaking past the jealous powers of destruction The Jew had always managed to smuggle his way in through crime and madness. He had stolen into Canaan and into Egypt. Abraham had pretended that Sarah was his sister. The whole two thousand years of exile, beginning with Alexandria, Babylon, and Rome and ending in the ghettos of Warsaw, Lodz, and Vilna had been one great act of smuggling. The Bible, the Talmud, and the Commentaries instruct the Jew on one strategy: flee from evil, hide from danger, avoid showdowns, give the angry powers of the universe as wide a berth as possible. . . .

Herman, the modern Jew, had extended this principle one step: he no longer even had his faith in the Torah to depend on. . . . Herman had not sealed a covenant with God and had no use for Him. He didn't want to have his seed multiply like the sands by the sea. His whole life was a game of stealth. . . (Enemies, 247-8).

He has carried his game of stealth too far, however. There is no longer any way out of the hayloft for Herman: he has become his own betrayer. By allowing his fear and paranoia to rule him, he has let his enemies win this round. Seeking love, he tries to find it in three different women, but refuses to totally commit himself to any one of them. Masha, the one he truly loves, attempts to drown the truth

in a deluge of words, but she, too, betrays herself: like Hanka, she is an Angel of Death. Until the end, she remains locked within herself, unable to truly reach out to Herman: her embrace is the clasp of death. Herman himself is hiding from God, the world and himself. His multiple identities seem to camouflage no identity at all. His overwhelming desire is to be "lost in America," rootless, friendless, childless and therefore, unsuffering. Singer's warning to Herman--and to all his characters--is that "no man can escape the sorrows of this world" (Séance, 19). No retreat--the synagogue, Yasha's cell, the "will to believe" in the Messiah, Herman's hayloft, and so on--can serve as a permanent refuge from suffering. Death is the only ultimate escape; hence, Hertz Yanovar's enigmatic, concluding words in The Family Moskat: "Death is the Messiah."

In the epilogue of Shosha, we rejoin survivors of another, more hopeful breed, in Israel: Aaron Greidinger, now a successful writer living in America, and Haiml, remarried to a woman he met in the concentration camp. Together they reflect on the miraculous resurrection of the Jews in a Jewish state.

Haiml said, 'Well, a Jewish land, a Jewish sea. Who would have believed this ten years ago? Such a thought was beyond daring. All our dreams centered around a crust of bread, a plate of groats, a clean shirt. Feitelzohn once said something I often repeat: "A man has no imagination either in his pessimism or his optimism"' (Shosha, 273).

They exchange memories and obituaries: Betty Slonim committed suicide, Celia and Shosha are dead. But Haiml-- and Singer--believe in the immortality of the soul.

Who knows? If we could live to see the miracle that the Jews have a country again, maybe we shall see the Messiah come, after all? Maybe the dead will be resurrected? . . . I have the feeling that Celia is here, that Morris is here, that my father--may he rest in peace--is here. Your Shosha is here, too. How is it possible, after all that someone should simply vanish? How can someone who lived, loved, hoped, and wrangled with God and with himself just disappear? I don't know how and in what sense but they're here. Since time is an illusion, why shouldn't everything remain? (Shosha, 276)

In Israel it especially seems likely that the souls of all Jews--exiled and doomed to strive for perfection in their long gilgul--will congregate here, in this holy land, their source, to reunite and find peace at last. There is a feeling in Israel--born out by archaeological findings that point to the factual basis of many Biblical legends--that every layer of land hides yet another, that every world conceals a more ancient reality. The earth of Israel is rich with the memories and souls of generations of Jews. As Saul Bellow writes, "Elsewhere you die and disintegrate. Here you die and mingle."⁸

Things are far from serene, however, in Israel. Its new settlers, the survivors of the Holocaust, are shattered beings. Unsure how to react to the prospect of life when they hovered near death for so long, they bring to mind the tense, fearful Jews of Enemies.

The newcomers are all out of their minds--
 victims of Hitler, bundles of nerves. They
 always suspect they're being persecuted.
 First they cursed Hitler, now they curse
 Ben-Gurion. Their children or perhaps their
 grandchildren will be normal if the Almighty
 doesn't send a new catastrophe down upon us.
 What can you know of what we went through!
 (Shosha, 282)

Singer is always uneasy in Israel. The layers of suffering, the haunting cries of the martyrs, the memories of endless persecution disturb him, do not permit him to rest. "The history in this land doesn't let me sleep," he confesses in another story (Kafka, 105). It is true that in Israel it is virtually impossible to forget the past: the state itself was born of Jewish suffering. Israel is the living embodiment of the "ethic of protest" against injustice and oppression. But Singer views it somewhat suspiciously, perhaps fearing that Israel is the twentieth-century version of the age-old Jewish Messianic yearnings. He is aware that survival in Israel will strain the strength of the Jews to its utmost. The anti-Semitism that led them, half-dead and greatly reduced in number, to Israel can now focus on them, concentrated and visible, in their tiny land. Hanka's prophecy rings true: the wailing of Jews is still heard today as they struggle to hold on to their fragment of the earth, surrounded as they are by enemies who wish nothing less than their total obliteration (a recurrent formula by now). It is somewhat poignant in the light of the violent events of the Middle

East to hear a still-innocent Haiml declare, in the exuberance of the birth of Israel, "I have never beaten or killed anybody, I can call myself a Jew" (Shosha, 284). Singer (who himself chose to settle in America) stands back, both reluctant and aloof, from the solution of Israel--it is still too menacing, too dangerous and risky.

The Jews in Israel must not forget their tragic pasts or else the fatal "will to oblivion" that overtakes Hanka, Jechiel, Masha, Herman and many others, will destroy the Jewish people as a whole. Israel exists, a country in the Middle East, a concrete reminder of what can happen when man's raging bestiality is allowed to run loose. For Singer, however, as an author, literature is his primary method of remembering the past, and therefore, an essential link to survival. Aaron Greidinger underlines the importance of literature in keeping a people alive: "the aim of literature was to prevent time from vanishing" (Shosha, 21). Literature provides the only means that allows us to retreat in time--to turn the pages of the world book backward--and thereby, to analyze the sources and roots of the enigma of Jewish destruction and survival. The question, "What is a Jew?" which we touched on in Chapter II gives way to the broader question "Why is a Jew?"--one that is "far more exciting and far more important. It touches on the raw nerve of Jews and non-Jews alike."⁹

What is the answer for the Jews? What is the cause of their seemingly endless suffering? These are the questions that haunt Singer throughout his writing. In Shosha, he finally gives his non-answer. Haiml and Aaron are sitting in the dark in Israel, awaiting a divine explanation for human suffering and injustice. The last words of the novel are Haiml's: "We're waiting for an answer" (Shosha, 286). They are probably still waiting. Good literature cannot give us answers--it leaves us in the air as effectively as God does--but it gives us the opportunity to examine the questions at great length, accompanied by the author's imaginative insight. Literature is Singer's own means of "resurrecting the dead," his own gift of immortality to the Jewish martyrs and his way of keeping the living faith alive. "While I hope and pray for the redemption and the resurrection," he writes, "I dare to say that, for me these people are all living right now. In literature, as in our dreams, death does not exist" (Passions, Author's Note).

NOTES

¹Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 202. This is one of Rabbi Nachman the Bratzlaver's tales, retold by Elie Wiesel.

²Saul Bellow, To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p. 58.

³Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Future of Yiddish and Yiddish Literature" in The Jewish Book Annual, Vol. 25 (New York: Jewish Book Council of America, 1967), p. 72.

⁴Bellow, To Jerusalem and Back, p. 26.

⁵Elie Wiesel, Night (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. 43-4.

⁶Souls on Fire, pp. 110-111. Wiesel is quoting Levi-Yitzhak the Berditcher here.

⁷Singer, Jewish Book Annual, p. 73.

⁸Bellow, p. 10.

⁹W. Gunther Plaut, The Case for the Chosen People (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 3.

CONCLUSION

Our body is very wild. It is a
wandering body of symbols.
And is our nervous system in
any way like that of the
Gentiles? The Hebrew mouth is
more like a wound; behind the
Hebrew forehead an eagle
screams.

--Uri Zvi Greenberg

Isaac Bashevis Singer's writing is a powerful example of the writer's imagination waging war on and even conquering the real world. The spirit and hope in his stories remain undiminished despite the bitter, painful demise of his people. His characters are lively ghosts, dancing on their graves, stubbornly denying the fact that they are indeed dead. One of Singer's most poignant, haunting images, in his story, "The Dance," is of a mother and her son revolving slowly in an eternal midnight dance as Warsaw burns.

. . .I often imagine that one night when the Nazis bombed the city, while fires raged and people ran for shelter, mother and son began to dance and continued until the building collapsed and the two of them were covered with rubble and silenced forever (Crown, 275).

But Singer--and indeed the obstinate spirit of the Jews--refuse to be silenced forever. Although the Jews may be covered with rubble, most of them, undaunted, are ready to

be reborn, to start life once more.

Singer's short story, "The Old Man," which appeared in his first collection, Gimpel the Fool, compactly sums up the miracle of Jewish survival. Reb Moshe Ber, a Turisk Hasid, has come to live with his son, Chaim Sachar, on Krochmalna Street in Warsaw. The old man, Moshe Ber, watches all those around him die: his wife, his sons, his daughter, until even Chaim Sachar, his last son, dies, too. He worries that now he will have no one to say Kaddish for him. Alone, penniless, starving and freezing, he attempts a journey, considered impossible for even a much younger man, to Jozefow, "a little village near the border of Galicia, where for fifty years he had lived and enjoyed great authority" (Gimpel, 190). His trip to Jozefow is a symbolic return to the early greatness of Israel. It is wartime; and despite a series of obstacles: dysentery and other illnesses, thieves, cold, hunger and imprisonment, he manages to cross the border illegally into Austria. His goal, "to observe the Yom Kippur fast at Jozefow," gives him the strength needed to continue his exodus to the seat of his faith (Gimpel, 196). "At various times, as he walked, his intestines popped out of place; he lay on the ground and pushed them back with his hands" (Gimpel, 193). His aged body and the hardships he encounters cannot dim his spiritual force.

Eventually, he arrives in Jozefow and his miraculous odyssey comes to an end. He weeps joyfully upon seeing his former townspeople. Amazed at the sight of the old man, they marry him to "a spinster, a deaf and dumb village girl of about forty" (Gimpel, 198). The miracle of Reb Moshe Ber's survival and return to his people is intensified and made complete by the birth of a son nine months later: finally, he has "someone to say kaddish for him" (Gimpel, 198). At his son's circumcision ceremony, Reb Moshe Ber jubilantly

danced on the table, and for the first time, mentioned his age:

'And Abraham was a hundred years old,' he recited, 'when his son Isaac was born unto him. And Sarah said: God hath made me laugh so that all who hear will laugh with me.'

He named the boy Isaac (Gimpel, 198).

With the birth of Isaac, the historical saga of the Jews seems to have come full-circle, and to begin again. Of all the patriarchs, it is Isaac, whose contrasting name and destiny illustrate the nature of paradox, from whom we can learn the most about the bitter, exhilarating truth of survival. As Elie Wiesel writes, in his book, Messengers of God,

Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter? Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter (p. 97).

The Jewish cycle moves from survival to re-creation; after

he has survived, the Jew must learn to re-create his world, himself and his faith in God, as Jacob did, and to rejoice again.

Perhaps one day, in an ideal world, the Jew will be permitted to live merely as a human being, like anyone else. But our imperfect, prejudiced society demands that the Jew constantly face up to his singular heritage and destiny, and admit that he is a Jew first of all--no one else will ever allow him to forget it. Therefore, Singer perceives all the movements we have examined in the previous chapters, the "isms," assimilation, conversion, and so on, as cover-ups, as unrealistic alternatives for the Jews. Singer's primary message is that the Jew must first confront his past--his roots--and accept his fate; only then can he move on to either extend his tradition or alter it as he sees fit.

All Singer's writings point to the fact that the Jew must survive, that it will be a sorry day for all humanity if the Jew finally disappears from the face of the earth. There is a certain spiritual immortality about the Jew that refuses to be quenched and that infuriates those who murder and torture his body. The Jew attempted--after the most inhumane, mass-scale murder of man (in which he was the primary victim) in the history of the world--to settle in his wretched sliver of land, hoping thereby to escape the world's hatred at last; and instead, found it only

intensified. Surrounded by gargantuan, bloodthirsty enemies, beset with poverty and the problems of ceaseless war leading to inflation and an unstable society, it is an understatement to say that the Jew in Israel will need miracles to survive. But the "old man" survived and what's more, produced a son, an heir, to continue his line. And the Jews, despite the Pharaohs, Hamans, Chmielnickis and Hitlers are still here--diminished and weakened, it is true, but still in existence. As Simon Wiesenthal, the great Nazi hunter, himself a warrior against the world's will to forget, has said, "The Jew who believes in miracles is a realist."

Singer's living faith, as expressed in his art, is eternal and timeless, refusing to bow to either hatred or mortality. It is an ardent faith which is based on survival, of course, but the heart of which is re-creation. Singer has said humbly, "I have only one hope, that I have given the children who were born in assimilated houses a certain bridge between themselves and old Jewish life." He has, however, accomplished much more than that. Through his breathtaking prose, he has reminded the modern Jew of the priceless secret of survival: that it is only by studying the past and learning from it that the Jew can hope to carve a noble, proud destiny. Singer has provided the modern Jew with "a certain bridge" leading directly from his past to his future. He has also proven that the

tradition of Jewish story-telling is as passionately rich and exuberantly alive as the immortal "living faith" it celebrates.

GLOSSARY

AGADAH (legend): The thought-provoking commentary on Biblical texts that is one aspect of the Talmud. Through profound and entertaining stories, parables and fables, agadah delves into the heart of faith, seeking the reasons behind its laws and ethics, and expanding on the mystical awareness of God.

BA'AL SHEM TOV (literally Master of the Good Name): Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (1700-1760), known as the Besht in Hasidic tradition. The legendary founder of Hasidism who brought mysticism to the masses and joy to the forlorn Jews of Eastern Europe. Love of God is the key to all his teachings, as illustrated in the following anecdote: "Beware, your coachman is dangerous and wicked," the Besht told one of his disciples. "I saw him walk by the church without crossing himself. If he does not love his God, why then would he love you?" (quoted by Elie Wiesel in Souls on Fire, p. 32).

DIASPORA: The dispersion of the Jews among the nations of the world.

DYBBUK: A spirit of the dead who became a demon because he had been so sinful in life that he was not allowed gilgul. The human being that this evil spirit takes possession of must have done something wrong.

EIN SOF (without limitation): The Kabbalistic method of referring to the Infinite, Innermost God.

GEHENNA: Hell.

GEMARA (completion): The longest section of the Talmud, devoted to interpretation of the Mishnah which is the earlier part of the Talmud.

GILGUL: The transmigration of souls, by which sins committed during earthly life must be atoned for. The spirit is condemned to wander through the world until his designated actions have been completed.

HALAKHAH (law): The part of Jewish literature which concerns itself with the ritual, social and economic life of the community and the individual. Utilizing dogma, halakhah guides the Jew from birth to death.

HASIDISM (from fervent, pious: Hasid): The mystical movement founded by Israel Ba'al Shel Tov that swept through the ghettos and shtetls of Eastern Europe, revitalizing the lives and hopes of the Jews which had been severely crushed by the disillusionment of the false Messianic movements. Its golden age was from 1760 - 1810.

"Hasidism is the Kabala become ethos" (Martin Buber).

This saying by the Rabbi of Kotzk sums up the teachings of Hasidism: "God dwells wherever one lets Him in."

The profane is the potentially holy. Hasidism almost leads to pantheism. Its followers believe in the

immanence of God and fervently communicate with Him through their prayers.

IBBUR: Impregnation of another soul into a person's living body.

KABBALAH (literally, the received or traditional lore):

The tradition of Jewish mysticism, hokmah nistarah, the hidden wisdom, most of it focusing on allegorical interpretations of Torah. It is more than mysticism, however; it is also esotericism and theosophy. Its primary texts are the Zohar which came out of eleventh century Spain and Ets Hayim by Hayim Vital which emerged from sixteenth century Safed. Kabbalah brings to light the "primordial religious impulses still latent in Judaism" (Gershon Scholem). In history, Jews stood for reason, justice, logic. At times of crisis, however, when their rational faith was not strong enough to sustain them, the emotional, exalted allegorical excesses of the Zohar and Isaac Luria's school in Safed gave them something to wish and hope for, reinstating in them the fervor needed to be willing to fight for or sacrifice themselves for their God and their faith. Isaac Luria's theories of tsim-tsum and tikkun, in particular, greatly influenced Hasidism.

KADDISH (holy): A hymn of praise, in particular recited as a memorial of the dead.

MAGGID: A preacher.

MIDRASH (exposition, interpretation): Talmudic literature devoted to the legendary interpretation of the Scriptures.

RABBI NACHMAN OF BRATZLAV (1772 - 1810): A great grandson of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, and the author of the most enchanting, dreamlike and wondrous tales in Hasidic literature. His stories are reminiscent of Franz Kafka's prophetic parables and forerunners of Isaac Bashevis Singer's mysterious, demonic yet holy universe. In the words of Elie Wiesel: "Rebbe Nahman--or Hasidic imagination, the celebration of the word, the glorification of legend, inspired and bewitching. Rebbe Nahman--or flight directed inward" (Souls on Fire, 175).

NATHAN OF GAZA (1644 - 1680): The young Kabbalistic prodigy who became Sabbatai Zevi's prophet and publicity agent, spreading the news of the false Messiah's arrival all over the world.

PESACH (passing over): The eight day festival beginning on the fifteenth day of Nisan (March or April), commemorating the sparing of the houses of the children of Israel and the exodus from Egypt.

PHYLACTERIES (tefillin): A sign of God's covenant with Israel. These leather cubicles containing scriptural passages engraved on parchment are attached to the left

arm and the head of Jewish males during weekday morning services.

ROSH HASHANA (New Year): The first and second days of Tishre (September or October); the Days of Awe and judgment for Jews culminating in Yom Kippur.

SHEKHINAH (indwelling): The Divine Presence that shares Israel's exile; the female aspect of God (in Kabbalistic terminology).

SHTETL: Eastern European Jewish village.

TALMUD (learning): The writings that comprise Jewish civil and religious law, consisting of two parts: Mishnah (text) and Gemara (commentary).

TANNA, pl. TANNAIM (repeater, teacher): The masters of the Mishnah.

TIKKUN: Restitution, re-integration of the original order. A concept drawn from the Kabbalistic teachings of the Ari, Isaac Luria, that greatly influenced Jewish thought.

TISHA BE'AV (the ninth day of Av, which is July or August): A day of fasting and mourning recalling the destruction of the first Temple by Nebuchadnezzar and the second Temple by Titus. It is traditionally thought that the Messiah will appear on this day.

TORAH (teaching, law): Consisting of the Pentateuch and all Jewish learning, it is the heart of Judaism.

TSIM-TSUM (concentration, contraction): God's withdrawal or retreat within Himself in order to form the world, thereby allowing evil to be born and giving man freedom of choice. A concept drawn from the Lurianic Kabbalah.

TZADDIK (the just man): The leader of Hasidic communities, the mediator between God and man. The tales and anecdotes that circulate about the legends of the great tzaddikim who reigned in the heyday of Hasidism illustrate the brilliance, homey wisdom, moodiness and fervent faith that characterized these leaders of men.

YOM KIPPUR: The Day of Atonement.

SABBATAI ZEVI (1626 - 1676): The most influential of the false Messiahs. Arousing frenzied worship wherever he went, Zevi's strange career reached its climax in his unexpected conversion to Islam. Surprisingly enough, many of his disciples continued to worship him even after his betrayal of Judaism and long after his death.

ZOHAR: The "Book of Splendor," the primary work of the Kabbalah. Controversy surrounds its creation, but according to the influential Kabbalistic scholar, Gershom Scholem, the author of the Zohar was Moses de Leon, a Spanish Kabbalist who composed this esoteric commentary on the Torah between 1275 and 1286. The Zohar moves spiritually from the creation to its Creator: we learn about God by witnessing and understanding His world.

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