

### THE NEW JEWISH STEREOTYPES

With this little-known but fascinating article by Philip Roth, we are inaugurating a new series: *The RESPONSE Reprints*. It is our intention to present in this section articles which have originally appeared elsewhere, and which, for various reasons, have probably escaped the attention of our readers. Although "The New Jewish Stereotypes" has appeared in at least two anthologies (*The American Judaism Reader*, and Michael Selzer's *Zionism Reconsidered*), we have discovered that many people are apparently unaware of Philip Roth's sensitivity to the vital issues of Jewish life in America. (An analysis of Roth's "Jewish" fiction appears elsewhere in this issue.) The most unusual aspect of the article is its remarkable applicability to our current situation, despite the fact that it first appeared ten years ago. Critics of Philip Roth may well be surprised to learn that he was urging American Jews to read the works of Elie Wiesel long before Wiesel was widely known in this country.

I find myself living in a country and in a time in which the Jew has come to be—or is allowed to think he is—a cultural hero. I once heard on the radio a disc-jockey introducing the theme song from the movie, *Exodus*. The words were to be sung by Pat Boone. The disc-jockey made it clear that this was "the only authorized version of the song." Authorized by what? For whom? Why? No further word from the radio. Only a silence drenched in piety, and then Mr. Boone, singing out of something less than a whirlwind

This land is mine,  
God gave this land to me!

I do not know whether I am moving up or down the cultural ladder, or simply sideways, when I recall that there has been the song "Exodus," preceded by the movie, *Exodus*, preceded by the novel, *Exodus*. There does not seem to be much doubt that the image of the Jew as patriot, warrior, and hero is rather satisfying to a large segment of the American public.

In an interview in the *New York Post*, Leon Uris, the author of the novel, claims that his image of the Jewish fighter is a good deal closer to the truth about the Jew than the image presented of him by other Jewish writers. I take it, by the way, that I am one of those writers to whom Mr. Uris is referring—the *Post* clipping was mailed to me by a woman demanding some explanation or apology for "the anti-Semitism and self-hatred" that she saw revealed in a collection of short fiction of mine that had just been published. What Uris told his interviewer, Joseph Wershba, was this:

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We would appreciate readers sending us suggestions for future reprints in this series.

There is a whole school of Jewish American writers, who spend their time damning their fathers, hating their mothers, wringing their hands, and wondering why they were born. This isn't art or literature. It's psychiatry. These writers are professional apologists. Every year you find one of their (sic!) works on the best seller lists. . . . Their work is obnoxious and makes me sick to my stomach.

I wrote *Exodus* because I was just sick of apologizing—or feeling that it was necessary to apologize. The Jewish community of this country has contributed far more greatly than its numbers—in art, medicine, and especially literature.

I set out to tell a story of Israel. I am definitely biased. I am definitely pro-Jewish.

An author goes through everything his readers do. It was a revelation to me, too, when I was researching *Exodus* in Europe and in Israel. And the revelation was this: that we Jews are not what we have been portrayed to be. In truth, we have been fighters.

"In truth, we have been fighters." So bald and stupid and uninformed is the statement that it is not even worthy of dispute. One has the feeling that, single-handed, Mr. Uris has set out to counter with his new image of the Jew, an older one that makes him nervous and mad—the one that comes down to us in those several stories, the punch line of which is, "Play nice, Jackie—don't fight." However, there is really not much value in setting oneself the task of swapping one stereotype for another. What I should hope Mr. Uris will do, when he does not happen to be having revelations by way of "researching" novels, is to read a new book called *Dawn*, by Elie Wiesel. Mr. Wiesel is not an American-Jewish writer; he is a Hungarian, now living in New York, and his first book, *Night*, was an autobiographical account of his experiences as a fifteen-year-old boy in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, those concentration camps, he writes, which "consumed my faith forever . . . murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust." *Dawn*, the second book, has for a background the Jewish terrorist activities in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel. The hero of the book is assigned the task of executing a British major who has been taken hostage by the Jewish terrorists; the novel deals with the hours the hero spends just prior to the execution . . . I should like to tell Mr. Uris that Wiesel's hero is not so proud to discover himself in the role of a fighter, nor is he able to find justification for himself in some traditional Jewish association with pugnacity or bloodletting. But actually, however, it turns out that there is really no need for me to tell Mr. Uris anything; if we can believe a news item that we find in *Time* magazine, Mr. Uris apparently knows a good deal more than he lets on to the *New York Post*.

In Manhattan (*Time* reports):

. . . Captain Yehiel Aranowicz, 37 . . . one-time master of the blockade-running Israeli refugee ship "Exodus," reported some

reservations back home about the best selling (4,000,000 copies to date) novel inspired by his 1947 heroics. "Israelis," he said, "were pretty disappointed in the book, to put it lightly. The types that are described in it never existed in Israel. The novel is neither history nor literature." . . . In Encino, California, *Exodus* author Leon Uris rebutted: "You may quote me as saying, 'Captain who?' and that's all I have to say. I'm not going to pick on a lightweight. Just look at my sales figures."

Certainly, it is unsafe to indict a man on the basis of what *Time* quotes him as having said; it may even be *Time's* pleasure to titillate its readers with still another Jewish stereotype, the Fagan, the Shylock, who will sell anything, his people, their history, anything, for a price. There was a time when this image was very helpful to certain Gentiles as a tool in dealing with the Jew. Now, however, there is another way of dealing with him—there is the image that Mr. Uris has sold, the image millions have read about the other millions have seen flickering on the screen, the image which is able to make the Jew and Jewishness acceptable and appealing and even attractive.

There is Leon Uris to make our image over again, and there is that famous optimist and cracker-barrel philosopher, Harry Golden. The image of the Jew that Harry Golden presents has, to my mind, been thoroughly and brilliantly analyzed in Theodore Solotaroff's essay in *Commentary*: "Harry Golden and the American Audience." Mr. Solotaroff points out that in Golden's three books, *For 2c Plain*, *Only in America*, and *Enjoy, Enjoy!* he "satisfied both Jewish nostalgia and Gentile curiosity," that "he presents with depressing clarity certain very real problems and conditions of our society in the past decade—a society characterized by its well-intentioned but soft, sloppy, equivocal thinking about itself. . . Garnished with a little Manischewitz horseradish the perplexed banalities of the middle class come back to [the reader] as the wisdom of the ages."

Mr. Solotaroff thinks of horse-radish; in considering matters Goldenian, I am a *shmaltz* man myself. It is interesting to note that Mr. Golden, in replying to Solotaroff's comments, manages himself to lay on the *shmaltz* with one hand while at the same time trying to wipe it off with the other; as any housewife will tell you, the end of such monkey business is very sticky fingers. In the columns of his newspaper, *The Carolina Israelite*, Golden writes that Solotaroff is dead wrong in accusing him of glamorizing the life in the New York ghetto. With characteristic restraint and logic, Golden explains, "We Jews . . . not only had a society, but, quite frankly, a Jewish city, and this sense of community is what lends memories of the old East Side its glamor, and it is for this reason that the bulk of American Jewry up in the middle class, lick their fingers over everything I write about the Lower East Side of New York. Sentiment alone could never sustain such amazingly widespread interest." The word of course is spelled sentimentality, and if *it* can't produce widespread interest, what can? Truth?

Popular Jewish interest in Golden, and in Uris, isn't very hard to understand. For one thing there is the pleasure of recognition, not of truth

necessarily as of verisimilitude, the plain and simple kick that comes of seeing the words *kugel* and *latkes* in print. Then there is the romance of oneself: The Hebrew Hero on the one hand, the Immigrant Success on the other. Harry Golden, a self-confessed Horatio Alger, furnished us with the names of the judges, movie stars, scientists, and comedians who have risen from the Jewish Lower East Side to fame and fortune. But what of the Gentile interest? Four million people have bought copies of *Exodus*; two million, copies of *Only in America*; surely they have not all been Jews. Why this flowering of Gentile interest in Jewish characters, history, manners, and morals? How does Pat Boone come to be singing "the only authorized version" anyway? Why not Moishe Oysher or Eddie Fisher?

One of Mr. Solotaroff's suggestions for Golden's appeal, is that, among other things, Golden presents to his readers a world characterized by "vividness, energy, aspiration, discipline, and finally the warmth of its life—that is, precisely those qualities which are said to be declining in the modern middle-class family and suburb." Surely there does seem to be a fascination these days in the idea of Jewish emotionalism. People who have more sense and anxiety than to go up to Negroes and engage them in conversation about "rhythm," have come up to me and engaged me in conversation about "warmth." They think it is flattering—and they think it is true.

I do not believe that they think it is complicated: that warmth, when it does appear, does not just radiate itself—at the center there is generally a fire. There were several Jewish graduate students in a class I taught at the Writing Workshop of the State University of Iowa, and during one semester three of them wrote stories about their childhood, or at least about a Jewish childhood; and in all three there was allusion to the emotionalism in Jewish family life. Curiously enough, all of the stories had similar situations and similar characters. The hero in each was a young Jewish boy, somewhere between ten and fifteen, who gets excellent grades in school and is always combed and courteous. The stories are told in the first person and have to do with a friendship that grows up between the hero and a Gentile neighbor or schoolmate. The Gentile is from the lower class—in one instance his background is Italian-American—and he leads the Jewish boy, who is of the middle class, into the mysteries of the flesh. The Gentile boy has already had some kind of sexual experience himself. Not that he is much older than his Jewish companion—he has the chance for adventure because his parents pay hardly any attention to him at all; they are divorced, or they drink, or they say "God damn" all the time, or they are uneducated and don't care; or in one stupendous notion of Gentileness, they combine all these attributes. This leaves their offspring with plenty of time to hunt for girls. The Jewish boy, on the other hand, is watched—he is watched at bedtime, at studytime, and especially at mealtime. Who he is watched by is his mother; the father we rarely see, and between him and the boy there seems to be hardly

more than a nodding acquaintance. The old man is either working or sleeping or across the table, silently stowing it away. Still there is a great deal of warmth in these families—especially as compared to the Gentile families—and almost all of it is generated by the mother. And interestingly enough, it does not strike the young hero in quite the same way as it strikes Harry Golden and his audience. The fire that warms also burns and smothers: what the hero *envies* the Gentile boy is his parental indifference—because ultimately he envies the Gentile his sexual adventure. Religion is understood not as the key to the mysteries of God, but to the mysteries of sex; it is not without historical precedent, of course, for religion to have to do with the quest for animal heat and passionate spontaneity. The warmth these Jewish storytellers want then is the warmth the Gentiles seem to have, just as the warmth that Harry Golden's Gentiles envy him for is the warmth he tells them the Jews have.

I must hasten to point out that in these stories the girls to whom their Gentile comrades lead the heroes are never Jewish girls. The Jewish women in the stories are mothers and sisters; the sexual dream—for whatever primal reason one cares to entertain—is for The Other. The dream of the *shiksa*. The dream of the Jewess. Though there may well be biographical fact at the bottom of these stories, as there is doubtless biographical fact at the bottom of Golden's anecdotes, the satisfactions that are derived through the manipulation and interpretation of the real events are the satisfactions of one's fantasies, one's dreams. I do not mean to denigrate the talent of these students, by the way, in comparing them to Golden; what the heroes of their stories learn at the end—as their Gentile comrades disappear into other neighborhoods and into maturity—is the burden of their own reality.

Golden and Uris, of course, burden no one with anything. Indeed, much of their appeal lies in the fact that they help to dissipate guilt, real and imagined. It turns out that the Jews are not poor innocent victims after all—all the time they were supposed to be being persecuted, humiliated, and mocked, they were having a good time being warm to one another and having their wonderful family lives. What they were developing—as Mr. Solotaroff quotes one reviewer as saying of Golden—is their “*Lovely Jewish slant on the world.*” Ah, this lovely Jewish slant—its existence surely can soothe consciences: if the victim is not a victim, then the victimizer is not a victimizer either. Along with the other things that Harry Golden offers, there is a kind of trap door for those Gentiles who, if they have not been anti-Semites, have at any rate been visited with suspicious, distrustful, or merely uncomfortable feelings about Jews and Jewishness, feelings which they are told they should not have. Golden assures them (as he assures the Jews) that we are really a happy, optimistic people—is he himself not living proof that bigotry does not exist in the American heart? There he is, a Jew—and one who speaks up, mind you—a respected citizen in a Southern city. Wonderful! And not in Sweden either, or in Italy, or in the Philippines. Only—Golden tells them—in America!

This may finally be good therapy for certain anxious and well-meaning Gentiles, in that they do not have to continue feeling guilty for crimes of which they are not in fact guilty; it may even unburden some halfhearted anti-Semites, who don't like Jews because they don't like themselves for not liking Jews. I do not know that it is very respectful, however, to the Jews themselves, to the facts of their history, realities of their suffering, humiliation, and pessimism: Or even to the validity of the Gentile suspiciousness. For why *shouldn't* the Gentiles have suspicions? The fact is that if you are committed to being a Jew, you believe that in those matters most crucial to man's survival and humanity—what the past was, what the future will be, who and what man's God is—that you are right and the Christians are wrong. You believe that one cannot understand the breakdown of order and values in the western world without considering the inadequacies of Christianity as a moral force in the lives of men . . . However, who wants to admit to all this, out loud? What we witness daily in American life is “the socialization of the antisocial . . . the acculturation of the anticultural . . . the legitimization of the subversive.” These are phrases of Lionel Trilling's; he has used them to describe the responses of certain of his students to modern literature. They have for me an even broader cultural reference: that is, to the swallowing up of difference that goes on around us, the deadly tolerance that robs—that is designed to rob—those who differ, who diverge, who rebel, of their powers. Instead of being taken seriously as a threat of a madman or a prophet, a man is silenced by being made popular. They are presently holding beatnik parties in the suburbs—which does not convince me, however, that all men are brothers. On the contrary, they are strangers; that fact is made clear to me every day when I read the newspapers. They are strangers, and often they are enemies, and it is because *that* is our condition, that it is incumbent upon us not to love one another—which is to deny the truth about ourselves—but to practice no violence and no treachery upon one another, which is to struggle with the darkest forces within ourselves.

But, of course, the Jews *have* done violence. It is the story of their violence that Leon Uris is so proud to tell America. Its appeal to American Jews is not difficult to understand—but once again, what of the Gentiles? Why all the piety about “the only authorized version” of a popular song? Why is the song even popular? Why is the movie so popular, the book? So strong, in fact, is the appeal of this story, that for myself, I am inclined to wonder if a burden has not been removed from the nation's consciousness, the burden of contemplating the murder of six million Jews, of contemplating it in all its raw, senseless, unavenged, and unavengeable horror. It is almost as though a popular song or movie had come along that would enable us to cease contemplating that other unsolved moral riddle of our time: the murder of the citizens of Hiroshima. With Hiroshima it might be possible that we be told a story about the beautiful, modern city that has risen from the ashes, about the prosperous, healthy, and more enterprising life that is lived in the new city as opposed to the old one. But be that as it may—and who is to guarantee that it may not be—now there is Golden on the one hand to assure us that Jews are really happy, optimistic,

successful, and warm (as opposed to grieved, pessimistic, dissatisfied, and xenophobic), and then there is Uris to say that you don't have to worry about the Jews after all, they can take care of themselves. *They have* taken care of themselves. One week *Life* magazine presents on its cover a picture of Adolph Eichmann; some weeks later, a picture of Sal Mineo, as a Jewish freedom fighter. The most horrendous crime in the world's history—a crime to which there is no adequate human response, no compassion, no vengeance to which a mere man is equal—seems, in part to have been avenged. When the scales appear at last to be balanced, there cannot help but be a sigh of relief. At long last the Jew is no longer the spectator of the violence of our age, nor is he the victim of that violence; now he is a participant. Fine then. Welcome aboard. A man with a gun and a hand grenade, a man who kills for his God-given rights (in this case, as the song tells us, his land) cannot sit so easily in judgment or in horror, of another man when he kills for *his* God-given rights, as he chooses to define them.

**M**r. Uris' discovery that the Jews are fighters fills him with pride; it fills many of his Jewish readers with pride too, and his Gentile readers with pride perhaps—in man's indomitable spirit—but surely with relief as well. It fills the hero of *Dawn*, however, the novel of the Palestinian terror, by the Hungarian Elie Wiesel, with less satisfying and buoyant emotions. He is filled with shame and confusion. No matter how just he tells himself are the rights for which he murders, he is not able to deny the blight of murder. Nothing in his past, nor in the past of his people, seems finally to remove him from the tragic nature of the act. He has seen and suffered so much, in Buchenwald and Auchwitz, that it is with a final sense of the death of what he thought he was that he pulls the trigger on the British officer and becomes another of the executioners in our violent century. He is one of those Jews like Job, who wonder why they were born.

There are people who have told me and who have written to tell me that Harry Golden and Leon Uris have made many friends for the Jewish people; they have told me that it is a long time since the Jew has been so respected and honored as he is today in America. I nod my head, for I am no enemy of honor and respect, and I enjoy friends. I enjoy them so much that I know there are times when we are even led to make them at the expense of our sense of ourselves, of our character, and of our fate. That is why at this point in human history, when power seems the ultimate end of government, and "success" the goal of individual lives; when the value of humility is in doubt, and the nerve to fail hardly to be seen at all; when a wilful blindness of man's condition can only precipitate further anguishes and miseries—at this point, with the murder of six million people fixed forever in our imaginations, I cannot help but believe that there is a higher moral purpose for the Jewish writer, and the Jewish people, than the improvement of public relations.

## SATIRE: THE EPIC ISRAELI NOVEL

Down in the subways of New York lies the El Dorado of every greedy writer's dreams—millions of commuters lipreading their way through tons of paperbacks a day. One of their favourites is the Big Israeli Novel, such as *Exodus* and *The Source*. There is no reason why anyone with a reasonable ignorance of Israeli life can't cash in on this popular literary trend. All you need is a typewriter and a copy of *Samuelson's Economics*. Following is a sample outline and a few hints.

*Dramatis Personae*: Kindly remember that half of your income will be from movie rights. You should therefore base your characters on real-life movie stars who will a) need the money enough to star in the "epic" and b) not be dead of a drug overdose by the time shooting begins.

*The Hero*: Typical Israeli Uzi ben Gibor is a major in the Army. A hero of all three wars (in itself no small feat since he was six years old at the War of Independence) he is proud, brave, noble, tall—taller in his parachute boots—and deeply beloved by his men. He spends his spare time on the kibbutz which his father, Moishe, helped found. Moishe ben Gibor, ne Greenberg, was Poland's greatest violinist until the Nazis came, after which he vowed "never to play again". At thirty Uzi is unmarried despite the urgings of his mother, an unsuccessful Sophie Portnoy. Truth is, Uzi's life of deep devotion to his country has left him little time for hanky-panky with the ladies, but his army buddy and confidante, Menahem (see below), remembers his youthful affair with the sweet and innocent Rina, whom he can never marry because she has betrayed the kibbutz and become a successful Tel-Aviv fashion model.

*The Sidekick*: Always ready with a joke or a picturesque curse, Menahem is invaluable because of his excellent knowledge of Arabic and his connections in the Dimona underground. An immigrant from the Moroccan ghettos with neither family nor education, Menahem has risen in the ranks thanks only to his quick wits, optimism and never-ending faith in the humanity of man. Menahem dies in the next to the last chapter a) betrayed by a comrade, b) by sadistic Arabs, or c) accidentally in combat. Menahem's death serves to create pathos, drawing the tears of millions and at the same time Proving A Point. In another type of book Menahem could have been a hero—and died in the *last* chapter, but you have to make the choice: either you make the N.Y. Times Book Review or you make a profit.

*The Heroine*: Voluptuous Ahuva Motek is a Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces. A brilliant general, her personal life is painfully lonely since the death of her husband, a promising poet, in the Six-Day War. Having fallen in the decisive Battle of Ya Allah, Motek is venerated by his widow who, although she did not really love him, has sworn "never to marry again". Weekends, the sensuous soldier heads for the hills where she invariably makes archeological discoveries of immense importance.