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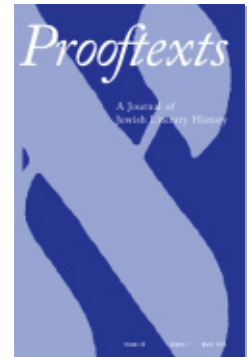
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## Scenes of Encounter: The “Soviet Jew” in Fiction by Russian Jewish Writers in America

SASHA SENDEROVICH

*This essay analyzes early twenty-first-century English-language literature by Soviet-born Jewish writers as a response to the Jewish literary and cultural politics of the Cold War period. First, by reexamining the postcolonial concept of hybridity, it argues that the “Soviet Jew” is not a neutral description of a Jewish person from the USSR. Rather, it is a discursive product that emerged during the Soviet Jewry Movement, a figure who requires reeducation, specifically of a religious nature, as part of advocacy by Jews in the West on behalf of Jews in the USSR. Second, it analyzes texts by Elie Wiesel, Bernard Malamud, and Chaim Potok that have become part of the North American Jewish literary canon with a focus on these works’ scenes of encounter between Jews in the USSR and Jewish writers visiting from abroad. These depictions specifically emphasize the visiting writers’ projections of their concerns about their own Jewish identities and about Jewish continuity more broadly onto the figure of the “Soviet Jew.” Finally, it demonstrates that Boris Fishman, Anya Ulinich, and David Bezmozgis offer a contemporary restaging of such scenes of encounter, now between émigré Jews from the USSR and their Jewish hosts in North America. In these recent works, the “Soviet Jew” is a figure that can be manipulated—frequently in satirical ways—as immigrant literary protagonists navigate the process of fitting in (or, not fitting in) within North American Jewish communal landscapes created, in part, with the help of the figure of the “Soviet Jew” itself.*

**O**n a first date in a Manhattan bar, Arianna Bock—the American-born Jewish woman who is a character in Boris Fishman’s 2014 debut novel *A Replacement Life*—relays a story to the book’s main protagonist, Slava Gelman, a Jewish young man who was born in the Soviet Union and immigrated to the

United States as a child. When Arianna was little, her American-born parents procured, at a high cost, a synagogue membership for a newly arrived Jewish family of three from the USSR. At the time, Arianna's father shared his doubts about this gift with his wife: "I don't think this is for them, Sandy.' Meaning, they're not religious."<sup>1</sup> Still, he failed to dissuade Arianna's mother, who retorted: "How will they ever become religious unless people like us—' and so on and so forth"<sup>2</sup>—implying that it was upon the well-established, synagogue-committed Jews in America to inculcate a similar communal and religious identification among the newly arrived Jews from the USSR. Those Jews, based on what the Bocks knew, came from an atheist Soviet background and had not been allowed to practice Judaism, at least not in any form recognizable to the Bocks as American Jews. Having paid for the immigrant family's synagogue admission, Arianna's parents subsequently discovered that the Soviet Jews they had sponsored sold the membership to another American family—and never showed up in the synagogue themselves.

This exchange in Fishman's novel, which is one of a growing number of twenty-first century works by Soviet-born émigré Jewish writers in English,<sup>3</sup> points toward something peculiar in the formation of mutual relations between Soviet-born and American Jews: American Jews wish the best for the Soviet Jews and hope to see them become more like themselves. Émigré Jews from the USSR, in turn, respond by exploiting the Americans' good—but, as it turns out, naïve—wishes. In this case, Arianna's mother wants to call the police to report what she considers the Russian Jewish family's theft of synagogue membership, but her husband encourages her to let it go: "Just let them be. Think about what they've been through. Give it thirty years and then they'll ask for it."<sup>4</sup> "What they've been through" here is code for what American Jews like Arianna's father know—or, think they know—about Soviet Jews. Despite the synagogue membership incident, in which Soviet Jews exploit American Jews' (lack of) knowledge about them, the American Jews persist in imagining that Soviet Jews will nonetheless resemble them in due time.

Within the emerging body of scholarly work on Anglophone literature by émigré Jewish writers from the former Soviet Union, one term from postcolonial theory—hybridity—appears with particular frequency. Yelena Furman, arguing against reviewers who have read this body of work solely in its American Jewish

literary context, calls attention to their failure to sufficiently acknowledge the authors' Russianness. Instead, she argues, the literary output by this cohort of writers "is hybrid: both Russian and American, neither wholly Russian nor wholly American, it is precisely Russian-American."<sup>5</sup> Noting that she borrows her critical terms from the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, Furman suggests that "these writers inhabit a 'third space' in which those terms form a hybridized Russian-American immigrant identity."<sup>6</sup> Furman contends that this fiction's "hybridity" occurs at the point of encounter between the "Russian" and the "American" and makes the writers in question "Russian-American." Adrian Wanner expands on the discussion of Russian-American "hybridity" by discussing Soviet Jewish émigré writers in other countries who are "Russian-Israeli" and "Russian-German" and whose "hybrid" identities are created of two equal parts, one native and one adopted.<sup>7</sup>

These formulations, however, overlook a key feature of hybridity as defined in the theoretical literature: hybridity emerges out of an *unequal* power relationship between colonizer and colonized. It is worthwhile, therefore, to return to Bhabha's now-classic theoretical paradigm and to reconsider, with greater precision, the Soviet Jewish émigré texts in question. Such a reconsideration aims not to propose new approaches to postcolonial theory but rather to work through some of the field's key theoretical paradigms as they help illuminate scenes of encounter between Jews from the USSR and Jews from America and the imaginative process of these two communities trying to understand each other.

Three sets of questions emerge from this rereading. First, Bhabha proposes that hybridity constitutes a "third space," which is not simply a meeting point between two different identities, or the site for a hyphenated identity, as Furman and Wanner suggest, but a site of negotiation within the specific binary opposition of the colonizer and the colonized, who have an asymmetrical power relationship. Who (or, rather what), in the context of Anglophone literature by Soviet-born émigré Jewish authors, acts as the colonizer and who acts as the colonized within the relationship that produces the hybrid?

Second, in the context of postcolonial theory, the colonizer comes to the colonized not only for economic or material exploitation, but also to undertake a civilizing mission that is meant to reconfirm the hegemony of the colonizing culture;

in the context of this essay, this cultural dimension will be my primary concern. In a typical civilizing mission, the colonizer, observing the backwardness of the colonized native, takes on a project of education and/or religious conversion that promises to improve the lives of the colonized and, in tandem, to provide the colonizer with a sense of moral satisfaction that justifies his involvement in the first place. The civilizing mission entails both the spread and the instantiation of hegemonic discourse, encoded in culture, to the colonized population. What, then, might constitute the equivalent of a civilizing mission in the case of Soviet-born émigré Jewish writers in North America and how might English serve as the language of that mission?

Finally, hybridity does not apply only to the colonized; it involves both parties to the colonial encounter. Hybridity for Bhabha is a moment when the authoritative discourse of the colonizer, through which the civilizing mission is articulated, includes the traces of the voice of the colonized, which, in turn, undermines the very authority and stability of the colonizer's discourse and leads to shifts in meaning that result in potential subversion. Hybridity, for Bhabha, is "a *problematic* of colonial representation . . . that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority."<sup>8</sup> Hybridity, then, does not "resolve the tension between two cultures . . . in a dialectical play of 'recognition.'"<sup>9</sup> By this definition, a reading of "Russian-American" as "both Russian and American, neither wholly Russian nor wholly American [but] precisely Russian-American"<sup>10</sup> does not constitute "hybridity" in the sense that is meant here. Instead, writes Bhabha, "what is irremediably estranging in the presence of the hybrid . . . is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: they are not simply *there* to be seen or appropriated."<sup>11</sup> What, in the context of literature by Soviet-born émigré Jewish authors, is the hybrid that contains the discourse of the colonizer already estranged by the claims of the colonized? Furthermore, what are the potential uses of this very discourse for the colonized's own purposes?

In what follows, I propose answers to these three questions and, in doing so, argue for a new reading of the body of fiction by Soviet-born émigré Jewish writers in English that has emerged in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century.

When it comes to culture, we must be free to identify colonial dynamics in settings beyond the South Asian context on which Bhabha and other postcolonial theorists have trained their criticism. Gayatri Spivak, speaking to scholars of Slavic studies in 2005, encouraged them to think of ways in which the definition of colonialism—when taken structurally rather than literally—can also apply to “different kinds of adventures and projects.”<sup>12</sup> First, therefore, in seeking to explore the terms of postcolonial theory in the context of Russian Jewish immigrant literature in English, I suggest that the movement for free emigration of Soviet Jews (commonly known as the Soviet Jewry Movement) by American Jews and their allies elsewhere in the West should be seen as assuming the role structurally similar to that of a colonizing agent. In turn, Jews in the Soviet Union (and, later, Jews who immigrate to the United States from the USSR) should be viewed in the role of the colonized. The presence of other actors must, of course, be noted here. One, the State of Israel, played a key role in the Soviet Jewry Movement—to some extent, behind the scenes; the potential of an influx of Soviet Jews into Israel was seen as a possibility for improving Israel’s demographic reality as a Jewish-majority state after the Six-Day War brought a large Arab Palestinian population under Israel’s military occupation.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the Soviet Union had its own model of what has been discussed as “internal colonization”<sup>14</sup> that in fact turned some Jews into hybrid cultural elites. The wide participation of Jews in different levels of Soviet government, especially in the early Soviet period when the Soviet nationalities policy was devised and implemented, paradoxically made Jews both the subjects and the agents of such internal colonization within the Soviet Union itself.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, the widespread participation of Jews in Soviet society as members of its highly skilled professional classes turned many Soviet Jews into what could at one and the same time be seen both as persecuted minority and as cultural elite—a phenomenon that Larissa Remennick has termed, paradoxically yet crucially, a “discriminated elite.”<sup>16</sup> Jews in North America, however, were largely unaware of the complex elite status of Soviet Jews: because they perceived Soviet Jews only or largely as a persecuted minority, the present essay focuses only on the aforementioned relationship between those taking on the role of colonizers and those located in the role of the colonized.

Second, although the American–Soviet Jewish encounter lacks the features of capitalist exploitation that characterize more typical colonial relationships,<sup>17</sup> the

Soviet Jewry Movement *was* accompanied by an equivalent of a civilizing mission. Namely, the Soviet Jewry Movement was motivated by the perceived “spiritual annihilation”<sup>18</sup> of Soviet Jews by their government; the promise of Soviet Jews being allowed to practice Judaism freely outside the USSR seemed to justify the promotion of emigration.<sup>19</sup> As will become clear, this assumption tended to ignore—or, simply, was not based on an awareness of—alternative models of Jewish identity formation in the Soviet Union, which scholars have begun to study only recently.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, I argue that the hybrid product of this encounter between American Jews and Jews from the USSR can be defined as the “Soviet Jew”—the term placed in quotation marks to designate not just a Jewish person from the USSR but rather the discourse created by some American Jews in the course of their civilizing mission, with the participation of some Jews in the Soviet Union. American Jews—haunted by their failure to save the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust—wanted to free the “Soviet Jew,” who was constructed in a particular way that demanded rescuing. As part of this rescue, they would civilize the “Soviet Jew” in their own image and thus redeem themselves and their shortcomings as a community. Following Bhabha, I argue that this hybrid also contained within it the possibility of subversion. The “Soviet Jew” in recent works by émigré Jewish writers from the USSR has reemerged as a playful discourse showing how Jews from the USSR have themselves been party to the creation of the notion of the “Soviet Jew” and have continued to benefit from access to this discourse.

In what follows, I first look at texts about Soviet Jews by writers Elie Wiesel and Bernard Malamud (with a brief nod toward Chaim Potok), which have entered the American Jewish canon and which contain scenes of encounter between Soviet Jews and Jewish writers from the West traveling to the USSR during the Cold War. I suggest that these scenes aim to reinvigorate the visitors’ theretofore lacking or insufficient Jewish identities, or their concerns about Jewish continuity, by reference to the plight of Soviet Jews and their need for a civilizing mission. In particular, I focus on instances in these encounters where the visitors from abroad observe that Jews in the Soviet Union, in part because of the actions of their government, have not been able to practice Judaism, and focus on the religious dimension of this “civilizing mission.”

In the second part of this essay, I consider the process of subversion by the Soviet-born Anglophone émigré writers Anya Ulinich, Boris Fishman, and David Bezmozgis and examine scenes of encounter, in America, between immigrant Jews from the USSR and their American Jewish hosts. During such encounters, I show, this literature's Soviet-born Jewish protagonists are conscious of their ability either to comply with or to reject the model of the "Soviet Jew" that their American Jewish interlocutors have constructed. In both cases, this essay examines the construction of the figure of the "Soviet Jew" as a postcolonial hybrid, and this figure's continued existence in the emerging body of literary work by Soviet-born émigré Jewish writers in America, with all of its subversive and destabilizing potential.

In his work on how participation in the Soviet Jewry Movement shaped the American Jewish community, sociologist Shaul Kelner concedes that the movement's significance "cannot be measured solely by its effectiveness in achieving goals vis-à-vis Soviet Jewry." Rather, Kelner suggests, "[d]uring the years it was operative, the movement also shaped the ways that Jews in the United States understood and enacted their identities as Jews and as Americans."<sup>21</sup> Crucially, Kelner observes that advocacy on behalf of the Soviet Jewish cause often involved American Jews modifying religious practices like the Passover seder to include mentions of Soviet Jews in the Exodus narrative<sup>22</sup> and presenting their political activism as "religious imperative." Set against the background of assimilation and a declining rate of religious participation, such practices aided the evolution of Jewish identity in America during the Cold War years.<sup>23</sup> Gal Beckerman captures this trend in a more emotional way, pointing out that, haunted doubly by what they felt were insufficient attempts to rescue the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust and by rapid assimilation into postwar American society, Jews in the United States "were dogged by a feeling that the literal abandonment of their [Soviet] brethren was the symptom of the figurative abandonment of their own identity."<sup>24</sup> Aligning the aspirations of Soviet Jews seeking emigration from the USSR with those of American Jews pressuring the Soviet Union from the outside, Beckerman suggests that the Soviet Jewry Movement enabled the two communities to arrive "at the redemption they each sought, physical for one and psychological for the other."<sup>25</sup>



In its role of nurturing and sustaining American Jewish identity, the Soviet Jewry Movement, I suggest, produced in the imagination of American Jews both the hybrid figure of the “Soviet Jew,” and a hegemonic discourse surrounding it. This process, which I compare to the theorized encounter of colonizer and colonized, is notable because the parties do not see each other as “others” or as the epitome of foreign, but rather as “us,” fellow Jews with a shared past and future. Such asymmetrical, colonial-like relations between Jews are familiar from elsewhere in Jewish history: French Jews who established the Alliance Israélite Universelle to educate and civilize Middle Eastern and North African Jews;<sup>26</sup> German Jews hoping to secularize and acculturate East European Jews (*Ostjuden*) in Germany;<sup>27</sup> the older generation of Jewish immigrants from Germany seeking to acculturate a later wave of East European Jewish immigrants to the United States;<sup>28</sup> and a number of intra-Jewish hegemonic projects emerging within the State of Israel, from the stigma ascribed to the “weak” Holocaust survivors from Europe by the country’s ruling elite promoting the image of the “strong” Zionist Jew in the immediate postwar years,<sup>29</sup> to the suppression of Yiddish and other diasporic languages as part of the promotion of Hebrew,<sup>30</sup> to the cultural, economic, and political dominance of the state’s Ashkenazi elite over Jews of Mizrahi descent either from the older community in Palestine or immigrating from Middle Eastern countries.<sup>31</sup> In these cases, as in the Soviet one, the fact of common ethnicity or origin served to bolster the apparent importance of the civilizing project.

In this case, I argue that the figure of the “Soviet Jew” that writers created in their texts and disseminated to wide Jewish reading audiences in the West dovetailed with paternalistic attitudes among Jews who structured their Jewish identities around “saving” Soviet Jews.<sup>32</sup> In these writings, the “Soviet Jew” emerged as a silent creature whose words could not be comprehended in this figure’s native language and were accessible only through the distorting lens of translation. A closer look at examples drawn from these texts, which comprise both journalism and fiction, will elucidate some aspects of the construction of the figure of the “Soviet Jew” and provide a basis for evaluating, later in this essay, how Soviet-born Jewish authors respond to it in their own work.

Elie Wiesel realized that identification with the plight of Soviet Jews could play an important role in forming Jewish identities in the West when he was sent by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* to report on Soviet Jewry in 1965. The resulting book, *The*

*Jews of Silence*, came out in an English translation in 1966. Recounting, in retrospect, his preparation for his first journey to the Soviet Union, Wiesel notes: “In my quest for my Jewish brethren, I had no idea what was awaiting me in that godforsaken land. Will I find them? Are they still there?”<sup>33</sup> In language reminiscent of colonial explorations of *terrae incognitae*,<sup>34</sup> Wiesel describes his ensuing encounters with the Soviet Union in ways that make Soviet Jews appear like exotic natives. Mary Louise Pratt, writing about Victorian-era travel narratives, has noted that descriptions of newly observed landscapes in the far-flung reaches of the empire tended to proceed first, by aestheticizing these landscapes; second, by depicting them in densely layered language that could provide the observer with opportunities to relate what he saw to his home culture; and, third, by having the visiting observer locate himself in relation to the scene as someone justified in evaluating, and in turn colonizing, the place.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, concludes Pratt, “the esthetic qualities of the landscape constitute the social and material value of the discovery to the explorer’s home culture, at the same time as its esthetic deficiencies suggest a need for social and material intervention by the home culture.”<sup>36</sup> Wiesel’s account of the Simchat Torah celebration he observed in Moscow proceeds according to this outline: by its end the exotic authenticity of the “Soviet Jew,” coupled with the writer’s sense of a proper “home culture,” reveal the necessity of American Jewish intervention.

The Simchat Torah scene Wiesel observed would be cited in accounts by subsequent visitors<sup>37</sup> and would be adapted and adopted by members of the Soviet Jewry Movement in the United States in their own observance of the holiday.<sup>38</sup> A group of thousands of young Jews had turned out in the streets surrounding Moscow’s Choral Synagogue to dance on the holiday of Simchat Torah—the dancing Wiesel observed was outside, while the religious ceremony involving the traditional dancing with the Torah scroll was inside the synagogue. Wiesel writes of the scene: “They filled the whole street, spilled over into courtyards, dancing and singing, dancing and singing. They seemed to hover in mid-air, Chagall-like, floating above the mass of shadows and colors below, above time, climbing a Jacob’s ladder that reached to the heavens if not higher.”<sup>39</sup> Wiesel presents what he sees in terms of existing (aesthetic, following Pratt) prototypes on which he could base his impression of the crowd: his designation of Soviet Jews as “Chagall-like” evokes, nostalgically, the lost world of Jewish Eastern Europe while biblical references make the Soviet Jewish condition part of a

long chain of Jewish mythic history.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, thinking in terms of these cultural stereotypes elides the necessity to acquire a deeper understanding of the specific Soviet Jewish meanings this and other practices may have held for their participants.<sup>41</sup> Why, indeed, were Soviet Jews, supposedly bereft of religion, celebrating a Jewish holiday at all? As Masha Gessen writes of her own experience at one of these Moscow celebrations in the 1970s, “I found my people milling outside the synagogue (we never went inside, where old men in strange clothes sang in an unfamiliar language). . . .” While making the same distinction as Wiesel between the events inside and outside the synagogue, Gessen explains how this ritual, for Soviet Jews, expressed ethnocultural rather than religious affiliation.<sup>42</sup>

Wiesel’s account presents the Soviet Jew as a sort of native savage—lacking awareness of the religious underpinnings of the holiday yet inexplicably authentic in his intuitive identification with Jewishness and the Jewish people: “Without knowing why, they define themselves as Jews. And they believe in the eternity of the Jewish people, without the slightest notion of the meaning of its mission. That is their tragedy.”<sup>43</sup> The “tragedy” for Wiesel here is that Soviet Jews, though appearing Chagall-like, do not clearly fit into Wiesel’s own understanding of traditional observance because he sees their actions as not based on any conscious commitment to ritual practice as such. Thus, to borrow from Pratt, Wiesel’s account relates the aestheticized customs of the natives back to the familiar “home” culture—of the normative Judaism that Jews are free to practice outside the USSR. With a national and ethnic identification but one lacking “correct” religious underpinnings, these Jews become recognizable to Jews in America and elsewhere in the West, but are still different from them.

The culmination of this description is Wiesel’s call to action: in somewhat resembling an archetype that Jews in the West can relate to, Soviet Jews “can reassure us . . . teach us not to despair.”<sup>44</sup> In the epilogue to *The Jews of Silence*, Wiesel chastises Jews in the West for having lost “their capacity to admire” and for seeing everything as “routine, ordinary, commonplace.” Then, addressing the Jews of the USSR, Wiesel proclaims:

This is where you come in. You show us that all is still possible. With less than nothing you restart history. Without school, without teacher,

without club, without programs with astronomical budgets, you set yourself up as a Jewish society, mostly underground but existing all over the Soviet Union. And you who know of Jewish existence only through its burdens, suddenly speak of it as a privilege!<sup>45</sup>

Addressing Soviet Jews in the second person, Wiesel is appealing not to actual Soviet Jews who could not, in fact, read his writing but instead to Jews in the West who, Wiesel thought, needed a blueprint for reengaging with their weakened and habitualized Jewishness. This address relies on rhetoric that constructs Soviet Jews as passive listeners—Chagall-like figures that jolt Jews in the West into action, and creates the “Soviet Jew” *as a hybrid* that, through primitive ways of observance, which appear both insufficient and authentic, constitutes an integral part of Jewish identity in the West.

Wiesel interprets the Simchat Torah celebration in Moscow as evidence that the Soviet Jews who gathered there “want to be among Jews and to be at one in their rejoicing with their fellow Jews all over the world, in spite of everything, and precisely because they have received an education of a different sort entirely.”<sup>46</sup> He believes they have been drawn to this observance *because* of the absence of religious Jewish education, and are rebuking the Soviet atheist education they did receive through the act of participation in these celebrations. Moreover, Wiesel sees this observance as “a sign that they wish to live as Jews . . . at least once a year, for one full evening. Somehow that will make them capable of waiting until the next time.”<sup>47</sup> While claiming to rebuff some critics of the custom—previous visitors to the Soviet Union who saw in the Simchat Torah custom “no relation to Jewish religious feeling”<sup>48</sup>—Wiesel actually reinforces that interpretation. In seeing the Simchat Torah ritual as a once-annual performance of religious/national affiliation, Wiesel implies that Soviet Jews lack any such affiliation for the rest of the year. This observation suggests that Soviet Jews are only able to be Jews on this one day and fails to see the annual Simchat Torah ritual as one of a number of ways in which Jewishness in the USSR could be communicated. “A sign that they wish to live as Jews,” in Wiesel’s locution, reifies the notion of what it means “to live as Jews” and consequently marks Soviet Jews through their lack of normative religious observance.

When, in 1956, Wiesel first wrote, in Yiddish, the memoir that would later become *La Nuit* in French and, subsequently, *Night* in English, he titled it *And the World Stood by in Silence* [*Un di velt hot gesvign*]. The return to the trope of silence in his later text about Soviet Jews highlights Wiesel's concern with appealing to Jews in the West about the conditions of Jews in the USSR. Where in the title of the earlier text the reference to "silence" works to accuse the world of ignoring the conditions of European Jewry during the Holocaust,<sup>49</sup> in *The Jews of Silence* Wiesel suggests that the "silence" of Soviet Jews needs to be overwritten so that it does not result in a similar lack of attention. The aim of *The Jews of Silence*, therefore, is to bring Soviet Jews to the attention of Jews elsewhere in the West. Specifically, Wiesel suggests that the Soviet Jews' supposedly insufficient yet somehow authentic religiosity should inspire Jews outside the USSR to identify with and speak up for their Soviet brethren. While bringing their Soviet counterparts back into the fold, they could also strengthen this proverbial fold by reengaging with Judaism where they live. Subsequently, the Simchat Torah celebration itself became an essential cultural site where the "Soviet Jew" was constructed and publicized among Jewish communities in the West. Inspired by the reports from Moscow, it was performed in the United States as part of the Soviet Jewry Movement starting in 1967—a year after Wiesel's book was published. It incorporated elements of solidarity with Soviet Jews into traditional elements of Simchat Torah observance—such as dedicating additional *hakafot*, the ritual encircling of the Torah scrolls, to Soviet Jews.<sup>50</sup> As such, it became one of the ceremonies that "helped construct a public political culture that defined Jewish participation in the American identity politics of the era as a religious imperative."<sup>51</sup> In other words, American Jews, mindful of their collective failure during the Holocaust, came to correlate their religious observance to their political engagement, with the "Soviet Jew" prominently inscribed within amended religious rituals that publicly called attention to the cause of Soviet Jewry.

Bernard Malamud's short story "Man in the Drawer," published in 1968, two years after the English translation of Wiesel's *The Jews of Silence*, further fleshes out the "Soviet Jew" as a figure capable of jolting a Jew visiting from America toward greater awareness of his own identity. This identity, formed through an encounter with the "Soviet Jew," is premised on assuming responsibility for Jews whose Jewish life has become insufficient or lacking because of the conditions imposed by

their government. Malamud's protagonist is the middle-aged and recently widowed freelance writer Howard Harvitz who, at a crossroads in his personal life, takes a trip to the Soviet Union. From the beginning of the story, Harvitz, who has recently changed his name back from the Anglicized Harris, is on an ongoing quest to enhance a recently rediscovered Jewish identity. This quest takes on a new focus when, upon arrival in Moscow, he is greeted in a taxi with "a soft shalom" by the driver, Feliks Levitansky—a Jew (or, as he identifies, a half-Jew) who turns out to also be an English–French translator and a writer of stories that he can't manage to publish in the USSR. Harvitz emerges from the encounter with his Jewish identity redefined. Levitansky—and, in a bigger sense, the "Soviet Jew"—is at the center of this new self-awareness.

Malamud sets up the Harvitz–Levitansky relationship in ways similar to a relationship in his earlier story "The Last Mohican." There, Fidelman, a self-confessed failure of a painter who comes to Rome from America to remake himself as an art critic, is greeted, upon his arrival at the train station, by a "shalom" that is similar to the greeting that jolts Harvitz in "Man in the Drawer."<sup>52</sup> In "The Last Mohican" the Hebrew greeting comes from a beggar, Susskind, who turns out to be a stateless Holocaust survivor.<sup>53</sup> Susskind is imagined as a kind of haunting double who literally wants to look like the visiting American Jew and continually begs Fidelman for his suit. This request, in turn, forces the American Jew to recognize his own previously unseen responsibility for victims of the Holocaust. The resolution of the story comes when Susskind destroys the first chapter of Fidelman's manuscript on Giotto. "The words were there but the spirit was missing," Susskind tells Fidelman.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Susskind's act and commentary forces Fidelman, an artist manqué who is the object of satire throughout the story, to abandon his apparently talentless endeavors as an art critic and replace them with a sense of responsibility for other Jews. The Harvitz–Levitansky relationship in "Man in the Drawer" is similar, except that the figure of the Soviet Jew replaces that of the Holocaust survivor—a logical substitution given the American Jews' perception that Soviet Jews should be saved in part as atonement for failures to save European Jews during the Holocaust.

In "Man in the Drawer," Harvitz's transformation, with Levitansky's help, requires ceding his claims to creativity and turning to a newly discovered cause:

informing the rest of the world about Jewish life in the USSR by smuggling out Levitansky's stories. Malamud calls attention to this reframing of Harvitz's priorities through the story's mirror-like structure. Upon entry to the USSR, Soviet authorities do not allow Harvitz to bring in an anthology of American poetry he has edited; upon departure at the end of the story he is the reluctant smuggler of a manuscript by Levitansky. This development doesn't come easily to Harvitz, whose initial encounter with the border agents terrifies him into thinking that he would be arrested if he tried to smuggle out Levitansky's stories. But he has an awakening after a dream in which Levitansky accuses him of not living up to his responsibility, as a citizen and a writer, to condemn then-current American war crimes in Vietnam (as well as the atom bomb dropped on Japan earlier). This nightmare leads Harvitz to begin to understand the nature of Levitansky's plight, that of an author "writing for the drawer" (as in the story's title), that is, writing stories destined to go unpublished. Harvitz subsequently imagines a hypothetical scenario in which the roles are reversed: *he* has become an author unable to publish in an America that has become a totalitarian state and Levitansky arrives in America and offers to smuggle Harvitz's anti-regime work out of the country and publish it abroad.<sup>55</sup> The American writer discovers his responsibility to protest as a U.S. citizen after seeing in Levitansky a mirror image of his potential self.

It is clear, however, that while a newly discovered sense of civic engagement informs Harvitz's decision to smuggle the manuscript, it is the unpublished book's Jewish content that motivates him to do so. Throughout their encounters, Harvitz fixates on the Jewish subjects of Levitansky's stories, even though the reader is told that only half of them deal with this topic. Levitansky, in his half-broken English, explicitly rejects being labeled a Jewish writer and sees even the "Jewish" half of his stories as having more to do with the abstract "truthfulness" of art rather than with Jewish concerns: "Imagination makes authority. When I write about Jews comes out stories, so I write about Jews. It is not important that I am half-Jew. What is important is observation, feeling, also art . . . whatever I write, whether is about Jews, Galicians, or Georgians, must be work of invention, or for me it does not live."<sup>56</sup> Harvitz's assumption that Jewishness forms the core of Levitansky's stories doesn't mesh with the author's own self-perception. The American is too caught up in an anthropological reading of the fiction and the author rebukes him for failing

to see its artistic merits. Asking whether a specific incident in one of the stories “was true” or not, Harvitz receives a reply from Levitansky: “Not true although truth . . . I write from imagination. I am not interested to repeat contents of diaries or total memory.”<sup>57</sup> Harvitz, however—already chastised by Levitansky for reading his stories ethnographically—insists on inquiring whether Levitansky, in his stories, is “saying something about the conditions of Jews in this country . . . there’s a strong sympathy for Jews and ideas are born in life. One senses an awareness of injustice.”<sup>58</sup>

Harvitz sees Levitansky’s stories as ethnographic observations on the persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union. Although Levitansky as the author of these stories has explicitly rejected such an interpretation, Malamud playfully gives the final word to the narrator, Harvitz. The action in the story ends as Harvitz sets out for the airport in Moscow with Levitansky’s handwritten stories in his luggage, but the story concludes with an additional few pages, in which Harvitz offers summaries of three of Levitansky’s stories, all of which focus on Jewish content. The summary of the first story deals with the difficulty of procuring matzah for Passover in the Soviet Union; the second, with a man who considers selling his father’s tallit to the authorities in the wake of a ban on the sale of ritual objects; the third—which Harvitz mistook for an autobiographical text earlier in the story—with a writer who, seeing his stories rejected by publishers because of their Jewish content, burns his work in his kitchen sink. Thus, Harvitz takes Levitansky’s stories out of their wider context, an eighteen-story collection that deals in large part with non-Jewish subjects. The reader learns about this context from Levitansky but is never given the opportunity to read anything but Harvitz’s summaries that focus solely on Jewish topics. Harvitz, who has prior experience editing anthologies, is used to selecting texts based on a certain criteria. In a sense, Harvitz becomes an editor here not of a volume of Levitansky’s stories but a volume of texts about the difficulties of Jewish life in the USSR, in which the summaries of Levitansky’s short stories are included for their supposed testimonial quality.

Harvitz’s editorial treatment of Levitansky’s work bears a certain resemblance to Wiesel’s fixation in *The Jews of Silence* on the apparently exceptional nature of the Simchat Torah observance. Much as participants in the Simchat Torah dancing might wish that their observance be located *within* rather than *outside* the fabric of



the everyday Soviet Jewish experience, so too, Levitansky claims that his work conveys an artistic truth about the Soviet experience writ large and rejects the idea that they focus only on Jewish content and should serve to satisfy an ethnographic curiosity about Soviet Jewish life. Similar to Wiesel's Soviet Jews, who, as "the Jews of silence" do not have their own voice but are instead ventriloquized by the visiting writer, Levitansky's own language is noticeably effaced at the end of Malamud's story. Though earlier in the story the reader gets a sampling of Levitansky's broken English, and though Levitansky informs Harvitz that the poor English translations of his stories by his wife do not convey the magnitude of his Russian, the reader is exposed to these stories only as a summary in a flawless English that is consistent with Harvitz's vision of these texts. Harvitz conveys Levitansky's stories through the process of what Laurence Venuti has termed "domesticating translation," which privileges the cultural codes of the target language over the nuances of the language from which the text is translated, thus erasing the text's foreignness and making it more seamlessly legible in the language of the target culture.<sup>59</sup> By "domesticating" Levitansky's narrative and erasing whatever nuances it might have had in the original, Harvitz's ethnographic rendition of Levitansky's fiction becomes a text that informs the American impression of the "Soviet Jew" and becomes the foundation on which Harvitz builds a rein-vigorated Jewish identity.

The American Jewish author Chaim Potok, writing about his own trip to Russia two decades after both Wiesel's trip to Moscow and the fictional Harvitz's sojourn there, elevates the religious dimension of the Soviet Jewry cause, which Wiesel and Malamud had explored. He comments on Jewish life defined through a lack while at the dinner table of one family he visited in the Soviet Union: "It was Shabbat, but there were no candles, or wine, or braided bread. A consuming desolation lay upon the room. . . . A Shabbat meal was clearly not a commonplace occurrence in the lives of these Soviet Jews."<sup>60</sup> An Orthodox Jew and a rabbi, Potok travels to visit the family—the Slepaks, one of the most famous Jewish dissident families in the USSR—on the Sabbath, having decided that attending the Sabbath meal at the Slepaks' justifies the violation of the Jewish law against travel on the Sabbath: "we had resolved that we would behave there [in the USSR] as if we had entered a zone of emergency, a landscape of combat; whenever necessary, we would transgress

religious laws.”<sup>61</sup> Invoking the Talmudic principle of *pikuakh nefesh* that saving a life justifies the violation of other religious commandments, Potok elevates the cause of Soviet Jewry to the level of religious obligation—an obligation necessitated by the perception that Soviet Jews are cut off from Judaism and religious observance.

Both fictional and journalistic, and all produced by Jewish writers with wide audiences in America and elsewhere in the West, these narratives along with other less celebrated journalistic accounts collectively contribute to the creation of the “Soviet Jew.” This “Soviet Jew,” marked by insufficient Jewish life, understood outside the wider context of the Soviet Jewish experience, and ventriloquized by visiting Jews from the West, becomes a figure who can—and must—be rescued and around whom Jews outside the USSR can build their own Jewish identities.

When the newer generation of Soviet-born Jewish writers in the United States, most of whom emigrated in the late Cold War or early post-Soviet period, began to write, they engaged with the figure and discourse of the “Soviet Jew” that had been created in part with the contribution of the aforementioned texts. If the children of Wiesel’s “Jews of silence” suddenly acquired speech, if the progeny of Malamud’s Levitansky mastered English flawlessly and could speak directly to American audiences rather than through his smuggler-editor of an intermediary—the result might have been similar to the recent fiction by Anya Ulinich, David Bezmozgis, Boris Fishman, and others.

The “Soviet Jew” that has reentered popular discourse in the last decade and a half now appears in a new source: texts written in English by émigré writers for whom English is a second language. After the initial encounter by the visiting colonizer to the colonized’s native country, the colonized gains access to what could be construed here as the postcolonial metropolis—and, along with it, to the colonizer’s language, which the colonized masters so well as to be able to mimic it. On the one hand, notes Bhabha, mimicry for the colonizer, who wishes to reproduce its own norms and worldview in the colonized, is “a desire for a reformed recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is always the same but not quite*.”<sup>62</sup> In this case, the mastery does not occur through colonial education in the home country, like in many colonial settings, but after immigration. On the other hand, Bhabha notes that as the colonized mimics the colonizer, “[t]he effect of mimicry

on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing.”<sup>63</sup> Borrowing this model to describe the “civilizing mission” of Jews in the West toward the Jews from the Soviet Union, it is important to examine how Jewish writers from the USSR are able to decenter the “Soviet Jew” discourse—to “produce another knowledge of its norms”<sup>64</sup>—through their awareness, mastery, and mimicry of it.

The “Soviet Jew,” I have argued, is the creation of an American Jewish discourse that marks Jews in the USSR as beneficiaries of a civilizing mission that can be accomplished through emigration. This discourse reemerges, some decades after its conception, in a body of literary work written in English by writers who, as Jews from the Soviet Union themselves, are keenly aware of the potency of the “Soviet Jew” construct in the lives of Russian Jewish immigrants in America. In what follows, I focus on scenes of encounter—now staged in North America rather than in the USSR—between Soviet Jewish émigrés and native-born American Jews. During these encounters, which happen in English, émigré writers present immigrant protagonists who can access the “Soviet Jew” discourse on their own terms and question the Jewish identities of their American hosts, in as far as those identities are a product of the hybridity created by the American–Soviet Jewish encounter.

Reacting to the story of the resold synagogue membership with which this essay opened, Slava, the Soviet-born Jewish protagonist of Boris Fishman’s novel, interprets what he hears in light of something preoccupying him in the present: Holocaust restitution claims. Slava is trying to convince Arianna—an American Jew—that it is acceptable for elderly Russian Jews in Brooklyn, victims of other twentieth-century tragedies but not, at least directly, the Holocaust, to forge Holocaust restitution claims settled by Germany. Reminding Arianna that her father found the Soviet Jewish family’s resale of the synagogue membership acceptable because American Jews had a responsibility to allow leniency on the basis of Soviet Jewish suffering, Slava throws Arianna’s words right back at her: “You said it: a thirty-year dispensation [until Soviet Jewish émigrés become like American Jews]. Let the savages lie a bit to the Germans.”<sup>65</sup>

Slava’s use of the word *savages* to describe Soviet Jewish immigrants is meant to be provocative. Through this intentional linguistic exaggeration, Fishman reveals a great deal about the potential for mimicry inherent in the appropriation by the colonized of the colonizer’s language. Slava here mimics the civilizing

mission of Arianna's father, which marks the immigrants as deficient but grants them a dispensation that allows them to exploit their status as "Soviet Jews." This instance of mimicry, in which the colonizer's impression of the colonized ("savages") is appropriated by the colonized, reveals the extent to which fiction by Fishman and others in his cohort of writers shows the "Soviet Jew" to be a hybrid discursive construction. That the word in question is *savages*—a word common in Western colonial literature—makes the relevance of the theory of hybridity all the more clear. The "Soviet Jew" here is a sort of savage, a creature who needs to be civilized to become more acceptable to the colonizer, in part to justify the colonizer's civilizing mission itself. But the "Soviet Jew" here is also well aware of his mastery of the colonizer's language, and is able to continue presenting himself as the "savage" the colonizer imagines him to be and to exploit that savagery for his own benefit.

In her 2007 novel *Petropolis*, Anya Ulinich offers another productive example of an encounter in which a protagonist understood as a "Soviet Jew" calls attention to—and mocks—the civilizing mission that seeks to remake the "Soviet Jew" in the American Jew's image. Sasha Goldberg, the novel's Soviet-born protagonist, ends up staying temporarily with an American Jewish family in the suburbs of Chicago. The Tarakans, as befits their caricature of a name (it means "cockroach" in Russian), are an exaggerated portrait of American Jews—but so is Ulinich's depiction of Sasha's Siberian hometown, a Soviet industrial wasteland called Asbestos-2. Like Fishman, whose protagonist's use of *savages* exaggerates the discourse of the "Soviet Jew" to the point where its constitutive elements become blatantly apparent, Ulinich sets up hyperbolic Soviet and American polarities to make the hybrid discourse visible.

Ulinich makes Sasha Goldberg the epitome of an imaginary "Soviet Jew" in giving her a biography in which Jewishness is very deliberately constructed. Sasha's mother is an ethnic Russian, while her father was born to an ethnic Russian woman and a man who visited the USSR from an African country. When he was adopted by the Goldbergs—a Soviet Jewish couple that were members of the intelligentsia—Sasha's father received his stereotypically Jewish last name, which he passed down to Sasha along with her part-black heritage. In turn, Sasha Goldberg's last name and her darker features, rather than any religious or ethnic identification as a Jew, coded her as "Jewish" both in Russia and, subsequently, in the United States.

One night Sasha is invited to a fundraising gala called “Operation Exodus,” to benefit Soviet Jews. Mrs. Tarakan has made Sasha wear a Star of David pendant around her neck for the occasion so that she—a nonreligious “savage” who is ignorant of Judaism, in Tarakan’s eyes—would be more recognizable as a Jew.<sup>66</sup> The name of the event, which references the 1990s campaign to resettle post-Soviet Jews, highlights, following Shaul Kelner’s argument, the ritualistic place that Soviet Jewry came to occupy in the American Jewish mindset during the years of the Soviet Jewry Movement.

Ulinich describes the event: “After the last of the guests were seated, Mr. Tarakan began to speak. . . . Sasha heard Mr. Tarakan say ‘thousands upon thousands of Soviet Jews,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘hope.’ Trained by years of Asbestos-2 schooling, her mind automatically tuned out the speech.”<sup>67</sup> Ulinich’s description of the gala deconstructs a basic American Cold War dichotomy that pits that which is Soviet against that which is not. Sasha’s Soviet school, in which students would have reflexively tuned out ideological buzzwords, is presented here as providing an appropriate background from which to understand Mr. Tarakan’s similarly formulaic speech. The equation makes the structure and the style (though not the content) of the speech about Soviet Jewish emigration and religious freedom akin to the clichés of a Soviet schoolteacher about the proverbial and ever-distant bright future of communism.

Sasha Goldberg is not the only “example of Soviet Jews”<sup>68</sup> present at the Tarakan’s fundraiser: there is also Yulia, from Kiev. While Sasha is skeptical about being paraded before the donors because she realizes that her American Jewish hosts see her as a kind of “oriental” native informant, Yulia is more than willing to play the part of the “Soviet Jew”:

My mother and I have been fortunate to slip through a crack in the Iron Curtain, to escape anti-Semitism and oppression, but thousands of Jews are still trapped in the former Soviet Union, unable to worship openly. Because of your efforts, many of them will receive the gift of freedom. In the name of all the Jews from the former Soviet republics, I would like to thank everyone present here. You will be in my prayers tonight.<sup>69</sup>

Ulinich, in her typically satirical mode, fills Yulia's speech, like Mr. Tarakan's, with keywords that emphasize her mastery of the language of her American Jewish benefactors and her ability to utilize it to present herself as a poster child for the Soviet Jewish cause. Though the keywords-filled speech, in perfect idiomatic English, with expressions like "to be in someone's prayers," should theoretically have made Sasha tune out just as she had tuned out Mr. Tarakan's appeal, Sasha instead finds herself paying attention to the details of Yulia's speech and wondering whether Yulia really prays, "and to what."<sup>70</sup> Sasha's awareness of Yulia's strategic deployment of the language of religious practice reveals this language itself as an instance of mimicry: Yulia, through her language, has taken on an image that American Jews believe that "Soviet Jews" naturally embody but which in fact Americans themselves have participated in constructing.

In her speech, Yulia refers to "the former Soviet Union" and "the former Soviet republics"—underlining the fact that the Soviet Union itself no longer exists. Now that official Soviet atheism has fallen together with the USSR, emigration for the purpose of free religious expression is no longer the desperate necessity that Yulia implies. Nonetheless, Yulia has learned to mimic a Cold War discourse that still resonates in the American Jewish community, one that is all the more appealing because she herself has been a beneficiary of this discourse as an immigrant from the Soviet Union. Yulia performs herself as a poster child for the idea of the religiously oppressed "Soviet Jew," an idea that outlived the circumstances in which it was created. In flawless English, she says exactly the words that have been part of the discursive hybrid of the "Soviet Jew"—but, in using them out of context, and in having Sasha in the scene to note that the speech is full of clichés, Ulinich decenters this discourse itself. Even though the Soviet Union itself no longer exists, there are still "Soviet Jews" who are imagined in a very specific way that conforms to the values of their American brethren.

For the Tarakans, Sasha is more than just someone to show off at their fundraiser. In fact, Mrs. Tarakan's own sense of Jewish identity depends on doing her part to help, as she says to Sasha, "people like you."<sup>71</sup> This help is, in part, economic—the Tarakans employ Sasha as their house cleaner; but they hire her also because they perceive her as a "Soviet Jew" who requires religious rescue in addition to economic assistance. Therefore, Mrs. Tarakan gives Sasha a kind of

crash course in Judaism—evidence that her own sense of Jewish identity relies on making the nonreligious Soviet Jews more “Jewish,” with *Jewish* carrying a religious meaning that it lacked in the former Soviet Union.

Ulinich restages these scenes of religious instruction in her 2014 graphic novel *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel*. In one of the book’s panels, drawn in the style of caricature characteristic of the flashbacks in the narrative, the protagonist Lena Finkle is mopping the floor on all fours while a woman in Hasidic garb holds a menorah over her, saying “Me-no-rah” while Lena replies “Cool.” This is the text next to the image, spoken by Lena in flashback:

I take the bus to the landlord’s house, where I do housework while the wife teaches me how to be a proper Jew. I don’t like this job and *I really don’t like learning to be a Jew* . . . We depend on the Hasids for everything . . . In his stress-induced paranoia my father believes that our landlord and the others have a direct line to the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] . . . To legally stay in the U.S. we must show that we’re “seeking freedom of worship.”<sup>72</sup>

Lena’s family is already in the United States on short-term visas while they seek permanent immigration status, the acquisition of which is contingent on them being proper “Soviet Jews” who display an interest in wanting what “Soviet Jews” are thought to want most—the freedom to practice Judaism. For Ulinich, these encounters—staged as scenes of American Jews instructing Russian Jews in normative Judaism—are a source of satiric caricature, which highlights and renders absurd the discrepancy between the American Jewish protagonists’ desire to effect a “civilizing mission” onto the “Soviet Jew” and the Soviet Jews’ mastery of and resistance to this discourse.

Other contemporary writers explore this discrepancy through similar, though less satirical encounters. David Bezmozgis pays attention to the painful cultural misunderstandings that occur when Russian Jews and North American—in this case, Canadian—Jews encounter each other in the hybrid discourse of the “Soviet Jew.” These misunderstandings cement the rigid terms of this discourse and prevent the parties from coming to a deeper mutual understanding that might transcend it.

In Bezmozgis's story "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist," the Bermans, a family of recent Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union, visit the house of Jerry Kornblum, a well-to-do Toronto doctor who, together with his wife, has invited them for a Shabbat meal. It would be the first such Friday night meal in the Bermans' lives. Roman Berman, the narrator's father, used to be a weightlifting trainer with the USSR's Olympic team—a position that bespoke connections with Soviet authorities and a good deal of privilege. Upon arriving in Canada at the height of the Soviet Jewry Movement, he had hoped to succeed as a massage therapist by touting his credentials as both, as the entire family consciously phrased it, "Soviet Olympic coach and refugee from Communist regime." The listing of both of these "credentials" on a flyer for his business—one emphasizing professional qualifications, the second playing up the political dimension of the Western discourse on the "Soviet Jew"—was what earned the Bermans an invitation to Kornblum's house in the first place.<sup>73</sup> From the moment they received it, the family began to imagine their host as nearly omnipotent in their abilities to fix Roman Berman's struggling massage business: if Kornblum "referred even a small fraction of his patients our troubles would be over," members of the family reasoned in the days leading up to the dinner.<sup>74</sup>

Bezmozgis's first-person narrator Mark—a grown man who narrates events from his childhood in retrospect—makes it clear that his family at the time was quite aware of being "Soviet Jews" who could, to a certain extent, manipulate this discourse to their advantage. "This was 1983," the narrator comments, "and as Russian Jews, recent immigrants, and political refugees, we were still a cause. We had good PR. We could trade on our history."<sup>75</sup> Bezmozgis's word choice here highlights the hybridity of the "Soviet Jew" as a matter of exchange between two parties: "trading" suggests that value can be assigned to the Soviet Jewish story and exchanged—here, for favors that could lead to the betterment of the Bermans' economic condition. These favors, moreover, can be received from the Kornblums because they, as the Bermans know, want to hear the Soviet Jewish story told in a way that fits their preexisting understanding of what the "Soviet Jew" is. To underline the emotional undercurrent that is essential to the "Soviet Jew" discourse, the émigré family seeks to impress their native-born hosts by dressing Mark into a Jewish costume of sorts: "I had been put into a pair of gray trousers and a pressed



white cotton shirt, with a silver Star of David on a silver chain not under but over the shirt.”<sup>76</sup> The outwardly displayed Jewish symbol—the Star of David, also part of Sasha Goldberg’s costume in Ulinich’s *Petropolis*—is forced upon the couple’s child to elicit compassionate feelings among local Jews. Western Jews, in turn, are imagined by their Russian Jewish guests as people who fall for this easy symbolism: the hybridity of the “Soviet Jew” cuts both ways with its stereotypes.

The Bermans’ performance of themselves as “Soviet Jews” appears to succeed. Mark, wearing the Star of David, notes how Kornblum greeted his family: “[Kornblum] put a hand on my father’s shoulder and told us who we must be.”<sup>77</sup> Bezmozgis displays his craftiness with the English language here, turning the standard speculative greeting of “you must be so-and-so” into an affirmative statement: Kornblum tells the Bermans not only “*who* [they] must be” but also “*who* [they] *must* be”—conferring the identity of “Soviet Jews” on the guests he invited for dinner. The outing succeeds for the Bermans in that Kornblum recognizes in his guests exactly the people he imagined. Convinced of the Bermans’ Jewishness and enticed by the confirmation of their status as refugees from the Soviet regime, Kornblum promises to refer some of his clients to Roman Berman’s massage business.

But Bezmozgis goes deeper in this story, pondering whether a less superficial connection could ever be established between the Kornblums and the Bermans—a connection that goes beyond the fixed parameters of the hybrid model of the “Soviet Jew” that both parties are complicit in upholding. The outward display of Jewishness encoded in the visible Star of David fails to communicate the deeper connection that could have been formed had the émigré family been able to present their unique kind of Jewishness rather than merely the sort of visible Jewishness they believed Canadian Jews could comprehend. In addition to the Star of David, which the Kornblums interpret—and/or are believed to interpret—as a sign that the Bermans must, indeed, be the “Soviet Jews” the Kornblums had always imagined, the Bermans bring along another item. The narrator describes it as follows:

Before Stalin, my great-grandmother lit the candles and made an apple cake every Friday night. In my grandfather’s recollections of prewar Jewish Latvia, the candles and the apple cakes feature prominently.

When my mother was a girl, Stalin was already in charge, and there

were no more candles. By the time I was born, there were neither candles nor apple cake, though in my mother's mind, the apple cake still meant Jewish. With this in mind, she retrieved the apple cake recipe and went to the expensive supermarket for the ingredients. And that Friday afternoon, she pleaded illness and left work early, coming home to bake so that the apple cake would be fresh for the Kornblums.<sup>78</sup>

The apple cake that the Bermans bake turns out to have been doomed from the start because it wasn't kosher: the provenance of the ingredients is unclear to the Kornblums, and the Bermans can't be assumed to maintain a kosher kitchen at home. The Kornblums, "though they sometimes took the kids to McDonald's . . . kept kosher at home," so the Bermans' nonkosher cake is placed away from the dinner table for the duration of the meal. Bezmozgis opposes the Kornblums' "normative" North American Judaism, with its allowance for the possibility of keeping kosher only at home, against the apple cake, which, for the Bermans, reflects a unique Soviet Jewishness. Because the apple cake never makes its appearance at the table, there is never a discussion about its Jewish meaning—a discussion that could have enabled the Kornblums to understand more deeply the contours of Soviet Jewishness. Bezmozgis, of course, raises this discussion in a different way: the story of the apple cake is accessible to his story's North American readers who can thus learn about the Bermans' Soviet Jewishness and how it differs from the Kornblums' conception of it.

Bezmozgis's apple cake is, in fact, similar to the Simchat Torah dancing that Elie Wiesel observed in the 1960s: it is a vestigial manifestation of Jewishness that originated in something that could be called normative Judaism and which, over time, lost that connection but could be understood as Jewish on its own, without the wider "normative" religious context. Wiesel, assessing the Jewishness of the young people dancing near Moscow's synagogue, interprets it through a *lack*—their insufficient awareness of Judaism and a resultant longing for religious observance. The Kornblums, dismissing the Berman's apple cake as not kosher, similarly reject the unique and hard-to-gauge aspects of Soviet Jewishness and see only an absence of Jewishness. They are still able to help their guests with the promise of furnishing them with useful business connections based on their visitors' successful

performance as “Soviet Jews”—but this performance fails to establish Soviet Jewishness as something with its own meaning and codes, most quite different from the normative religious symbols and desires that Jews in the West had come to expect.<sup>79</sup> The Kornblums return the apple cake to the Bermans at the end of the dinner, seeing it as no more than a sign of their visitors’ *lack* of religious observance. In reality, for the Bermans, the story of the apple cake is one in which the lack of religious observance, initiated by the changes imposed by the Soviet system, was eventually transformed into a positive attribute of Soviet Jewishness. After all, the Bermans decided to bake the apple cake for the Kornblums in the first place because in the Soviet Jewish family’s lore the apple cake was the embodiment of a Jewish tradition and the logical—if not even somehow required—dessert to eat at a Shabbat meal. Even though the apple cake encodes a much more sincere—though harder to identify—Soviet Jewish story than the forced performance of Bermans as “Soviet Jews” that unfolds at dinner, it never enters the scene of encounter as something that can be discussed.

Just as the presence of the apple cake in this story opens the possibility of an alternative Jewish identity (even if it is rejected), other fiction by Soviet-born North American Jewish writers has identified further assumptions underlying the “Soviet Jew” discourse and has begun to present them as topics for discussion. One pertinent example, to conclude the present study, comes from Boris Fishman’s *A Replacement Life*, with which this essay began.

Out on their first date, during which Arianna recounts to Slava her family’s failed attempt to gift a synagogue membership to a family of Soviet Jews, Arianna makes another admission. Impressed by an essay Slava had written about a particular moment in his Soviet childhood, Arianna reflects on how Slava’s writing challenged what she thought she knew about where Slava came from: “Most of Jews in America—that’s where we come from. I grew up listening to my grandmother’s stories. And you form a certain image. And then you read something like what you wrote, and it’s nothing at all like what you thought.”<sup>80</sup> Behind Arianna’s words is an inkling of a realization that the received wisdom about Eastern Europe, formed through stories of the older generation, might not fully correspond to any sort of objective reality. Like the East European shtetl, mythologized in such popular cultural phenomena as the musical and subsequent film *Fiddler on the*

*Roof*,<sup>81</sup> the “Soviet Jew” was a received discourse that has participated in the formation of American Jewish identity.

But Arianna’s realization here achieves something even more profound. The English-language words of an American Jewish character are written by a Soviet-born Jewish writer in his adopted tongue. Arianna is in a sense a kind of double, in reverse, of Levitansky from Malamud’s story, a Russian Jew whose speech is written by an American Jewish writer: her American Jewish speech is written by a Russian Jewish writer. Although the relationship between Slava and Arianna in *A Replacement Life* proceeds with Arianna’s continuing to instruct Slava about proper American ways, the phrase that Fishman puts in this protagonist’s mouth is hybridity discourse at its craftiest: the colonized mimics the speech of the colonizer to the point where the very foundations of the colonizer’s identity are destabilized and undermined. The American Jewish protagonist here essentially says—in the English of the Soviet-born Jewish writer—that an apparently stable American Jewish identity, consisting in part of the idea of the “Soviet Jew” as the object of a civilizing mission, may be based on stories that are more mythological than realistic. In this and similar scenes of encounter, the party situated in the role of the colonized mimics the discourse of the party located in the role of the colonizer. Literary depictions of such scenes of encounter bring forth new provocative questions about the history of American–Soviet Jewish relations and the stakes of that history for an ongoing conversation between the two communities.

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## NOTES

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- 1 Boris Fishman, *A Replacement Life: A Novel* (New York: Harper, 2014), 80.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 The publication of Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* in 2002 is generally seen as the beginning point of the new "Russian" wave of American Jewish literature. For studies of this new wave of literature, see Yelena Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts: Embracing the Hyphen in Russian-American Fiction," *Slavic and East European Journal* 55, no. 1 (2011): 19–37; Sasha Senderovich, "Soviet Jews, Re-Imagined: Anglophone Émigré Jewish Writers from the USSR," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction*, ed. David Brauner and Axel Stähler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 90–104; Adrian Wanner, *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2011); Adrian Wanner, "Russian Jews as American Writers: A New Paradigm for Jewish Multiculturalism?" *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 37, no. 2 (2012): 157–76. Assessing the role of different cultural and literary institutions in the twenty-first century America, Josh Lambert has noted the participation of *The New Yorker* in the promotion of this literature: Josh Lambert, "Since 2000," in *The Cambridge History of American Jewish Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 628–31.
- 4 Fishman, 80.
- 5 Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts," 21. Furman also describes as "hybrid" a set of recent (2014 publication date) novels by these writers; see Yelena Furman, "Telling Their Hybrid Stories: Three Recent Works of Russian-American Fiction," *Slavic and East European Journal* 59, no. 1 (2015): 116–24.
- 6 Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts," 23.
- 7 Wanner, *Out of Russia*.

- 8 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 162.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Furman, “Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts,” 21.
- 11 Bhabha, 163.
- 12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak et al., “Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 828.
- 13 Among others, Stuart Altshuler discusses in detail the split in the American Jewish community between the proponents of Israel’s preferences that Soviet Jews immigrate to Israel, putting Israel’s demographic priorities first, and those wishing to assist the emigration of Soviet Jews from the USSR more generally: Stuart Altshuler, *From Exodus to Freedom: A History of the Soviet Jewry Movement* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 119–65. See also Nehemiah Levanon, “Israel’s Role in the Campaign,” in *A Second Exodus: The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews*, ed. Murray Friedman and Albert B. Chernin (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 70–83. One of the major issues with Israel’s wishes that Soviet Jews immigrate to Israel was the so-called “dropout” (*noshrim*, in Hebrew) phenomenon—Soviet Jews departing the USSR on Israeli visas but opting not to continue on to Israel once they would have reached the intermediate point of their journey in Vienna; see, for example: Steven E. Windmueller, “The ‘Noshrim’ War: Dropping Out,” in *A Second Exodus: The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews*, 161–72. The artistic treatment of the latter phenomenon, which has for some time been a kind of lacuna in Jewish collective memory because the pervasiveness of the “dropout” phenomenon did not easily fit into a vision of Soviet Jews as Zionists, is beginning to be filled; see, for example: David Bezmozgis, *The Free World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Svetlana Boym, “A Soviet Drop-Out’s Journey to Freedom,” *Tablet Magazine*, 3 July 2014, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/176945/camp-tale>.
- 14 Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).
- 15 Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 16 Larissa I. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2007), 31.

- 17 It would, however, be pertinent to reflect, on an occasion separate from these pages, on how Soviet-born Jews become willing if somewhat misled poster children for various capitalist ventures—something that the works of Gary Shteyngart deal with particularly well.
- 18 The phrase “spiritual annihilation” was used widely by different actors in the Soviet Jewry Movement. For example, the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry held in April 1964 adopted on its list of resolutions a plan “to mobilize public opinion into a worldwide moral force which will save Soviet Jewry from spiritual annihilation.” Quoted in Friedman and Chernin, eds., 36.
- 19 For accounts of the history of the Soviet Jewry Movement—including the religious imperative behind it, among other texts, see the following: Altshuler, *From Exodus to Freedom*; Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010); Henry L. Feingold, *“Silent No More”: Saving the Jews of Russia, the American Jewish Effort, 1967–1989* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Friedman and Chernin, *A Second Exodus*; Yaacov Ro’i, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewish Emigration, 1948–1967* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Religious metaphors, most notably the one that compared the emigration of Jews from the USSR to the Exodus from Egypt—with all that it this comparison suggests in the collective imagination—are present in titles of some of these histories themselves.
- 20 For recent studies on the twentieth-century Soviet Jewish experience, which have begun to map out the coordinates of the hard-to-define attributes of a phenomenon that may be called Soviet Jewishness, as (often) separate from notions of religious observance in Judaism, see Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train: Soviet Yiddish and Russian-Jewish Literature of the Twentieth Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011); Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
- 21 Shaul Kelner, “Ritualized Protest and Redemptive Politics: Cultural Consequences of the American Mobilization to Free Soviet Jewry,” *Jewish Social Studies* 14, no. 3 (2008): 2.
- 22 Shaul Kelner, “The Bureaucratization of Ritual Innovation: The Festive Cycle of the American Soviet Jewry Movement,” in *Revisioning Ritual: Jewish Traditions in*

- Transition*, ed. Simon J. Bronner, 2011, 376; Kelner, “Ritualized Protest and Redemptive Politics,” 15–29.
- 23 Kelner, “Ritualized Protest and Redemptive Politics,” 2.
- 24 Beckerman, 5.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 26 For example, exhibitions of arts and crafts by “Oriental” Jews were displayed by the Alliance Israélite Universelle at the Chicago World Fair, allowing the Ashkenazi Jews of Chicago to share with the Alliance, which itself had a civilizing mission for Jews of the Middle East and North Africa, in “their commitment as Americans to rehabilitate the oppressed.” Alma Rachel Heckman and Frances Malino, “Packed in Twelve Cases: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 19, no. 1 (2012): 58. On the “self-Orientalizing” of “Eastern” Jews—consciously representing themselves as “Eastern” as a response to the expectations of Jews from the West, see Julia Phillips Cohen, “Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage,” *American Historical Review* 119, no. 2 (2014): 364–98. For a study of the correlation between the “civilizing mission” of the Alliance in Morocco and French imperial politics—including the introduction of conservative gender norms—see Peter Drucker, “‘Disengaging from the Muslim Spirit’: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and Moroccan Jews,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 11, no. 1 (2015): 3–23.
- 27 See, for example: Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).
- 28 The scholarship on immigrant aid societies and other institutions set up by the earlier generation of German Jewish immigrants in the United States for the acculturation of newly arriving East European Jews at the turn of the twentieth century is extensive. Recently, Laura R. Fisher helpfully examined some of the pushback against the institutions of acculturation by immigrant Yiddish writers: Laura R. Fisher, “Writing Immigrant Aid: The Settlement House and the Problem of Representation,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 37, no. 2 (2012): 83–107.
- 29 Dina Porat, *Israeli Society, the Holocaust and Its Survivors* (London and Portland, Ore.: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008), 337–414; Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).



- 30 Yael Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 1–44; Liora R. Halperin, *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920–1948* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015); Rachel Rojanski, “The Status of Yiddish in Israel, 1948–1951: An Overview,” in *Yiddish after the Holocaust*, ed. Joseph Sherman (Oxford: Boulevard, 2004), 46–59; Rachel Rojanski, “Ben-Gurion and Yiddish after the Holocaust,” in *The Politics of Yiddish*, ed. Shlomo Berger (Amsterdam: Menasseh ben Israel Institute, 2010), 31–47; Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 102–131.
- 31 Lital Levy, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Mashriq,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (2008): 452–69; Yehouda A. Shenhav, *The Arab Jews : A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 136–83; Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010).
- 32 Stuart Altshuler, for example, notes “the charges of ‘paternalism’ that flowed from a seeming disregard of the voices coming from Soviet Jews themselves. . . .”; Altshuler, 22.
- 33 Elie Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence: A Personal Report on Soviet Jewry*, trans. Neal Kozodoy (New York: Schocken, 2011), vii.
- 34 Mary Louise Pratt, for example, notes that “travel and exploration writing produced ‘the rest of the world’” for Western readership during the period of colonial expansion. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 204–205.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 37 See, for example: Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 116; Arthur I. Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 84–85.
- 38 Kelner, “The Bureaucratization of Ritual Innovation,” 371–72.
- 39 Wiesel, 50.
- 40 For example, in describing the same event (the dancing on Simchat Torah near the Moscow synagogue) Wiesel notes, bemused, that “a girl strummed her guitar and sang a Yiddish folk song ‘Buy my cigarettes, take pity on a poor orphan.’” *Ibid.*, 51.

Anna Shternshis notes that this song, “Papirosn” (“Cigarettes”) was popular in the Soviet Union from the 1930s onward and was allowed to be performed in public all the way through the Soviet period: Shternshis, 130–31. The choice of the song by the youths Wiesel observed in the mid-1960s may also have had to do with the visit of the Yiddish duo, the Barry Sisters, from the United States in 1959 as part of the Moscow Youth Festival—they performed the song, and the record of their performance circulated in the Soviet Union. Thus, a number of things Wiesel notes about the peculiar displays of Jewishness by Jews he met in the Soviet Union have an explanation in the unique ways of construction of Jewish identification in the Soviet Union that Wiesel would not have been fully aware of.

- 41 For the description of other cultural activities, such as concerts in Yiddish, that contributed to the life of Soviet Jews, see, for example, Ro'i, 319–21.
- 42 Masha Gessen, *Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region* (New York: Nextbook/Schocken, 2016), 8.
- 43 Wiesel, 55.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 49 Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish–Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 220.
- 50 Kelner, “The Bureaucratization of Ritual Innovation,” 371.
- 51 Kelner, “Ritualized Protest and Redemptive Politics,” 2.
- 52 The scene of initial encounter launched with the help of a greeting in Hebrew is repeated in Chaim Potok’s biography of the Slepak family—the family of one of the most famous Soviet Jewish dissidents. In Potok’s description, at the start of his first meeting with Slepak, the enigmatic Soviet Jew steps out from behind a pillar at a Moscow subway station to greet the visiting Jew from the West with a “shalom aleichem.” Chaim Potok, *The Gates of November: Chronicles of the Slepak Family* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 4.
- 53 Bernard Malamud, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 201.

- 54 Ibid., 220.
- 55 Ibid., 439.
- 56 Ibid., 428.
- 57 Ibid., 427–28.
- 58 Ibid., 428.
- 59 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 60 Potok, 10.
- 61 Ibid., 3.
- 62 Bhabha, 122.
- 63 Ibid., 123.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Fishman, 81.
- 66 Anya Ulinich, *Petropolis: A Novel* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 155.
- 67 Ibid., 157.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Ibid., 156–57.
- 70 Ibid., 158.
- 71 Ibid., 154.
- 72 Anya Ulinich, *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel: A Graphic Novel* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 73.
- 73 David Bezmozgis, *Natasha and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 27.
- 74 Ibid., 29.
- 75 Ibid., 21.
- 76 Ibid., 31.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Ibid., 30.
- 79 Mikhail Krutikov has proposed a model for Jewish experience during late socialism which follows Alexei Yurchak's analysis of the experience of Soviet citizens

during the same period as defined by being *vne*— outside the system—rather than active involvement either in the Soviet system or in the systemic anti-Soviet opposition circles—see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). Quoting the writer Dina Rubina, who defines herself as being neither Soviet (“I managed not to join the Komsomol even”) nor dissident (“one needed to possess a different temperament for it”), Krutikov concludes, after Yurchak, that different forms of Jewishness during late socialism were located in “deterritorialized communities” and, therefore, also similarly “deterritorialized” practices that defined such communities. Furthermore, Krutikov suggests that emigration from the USSR or its successor states could be seen as an attempt to preserve this “deterritorialized” Jewishness which has lost its meaning when the poles of “Soviet” and “anti-Soviet” have themselves weakened as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is a way of seeing both the Simchat Torah in Moscow that Wiesel describes and the apple cake from Bezmozgis’s story as examples of these kinds of “deterritorialized” practices that are the hard-to-define attributes of Soviet Jewishness. Mikhail Krutikov, “Evreiskaia pamiat’ i ‘parasovetskii’ khronotop: Aleksandr Gol’dshteyn, Oleg Iuriev, Aleksandr Ilichevskii,” *NLO* 127, no. 3 (2014), <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/5154>.

80 Fishman, 76.

81 See, for example, Seth L. Wolitz, “The Americanization of Tevye or Boarding the Jewish ‘Mayflower,’” *American Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1988): 514–36.