'SAY YOU ARE MY SISTER'

The Bible in the Modern World, 53

'Say you are my sister'

Danger, Seduction and the Foreign in Biblical Literature and Beyond

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Abbreviations

BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BibRes	*Biblical Research*
BQ	*The Biblical Quarterly*
CRes	*Currents in Research*
HS	*Hebrew Studies*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBQ	*Jewish Biblical Quarterly*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JPS	*Jewish Publication Society*
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
PTL	*A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature*
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
SoRes	*Social Research*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*

Preface and Acknowledgments

The book is a translated, updated version of my book, *Imri-na achoti at* (Say You Are my Sister), which was published in Hebrew in 2003. The book engages with the well-known biblical story of the handing over of the Matriarch Sarah (and later Rebekah) to the harem of a foreign king. The seminal story recurs in additional versions in the Bible, was 'rewritten' in early and late Midrashic literature, and also appears in modern Hebrew literature.

The idea of writing this book originated in a seminar on dialogical relations between modern Hebrew literature and the Bible, which I gave over several years at the Kibbutzim College of Education in Tel Aviv. The interpretative process created in the course of the learning dialogue was based on a fascinating dialectical duality: the intertextual dynamic creates a sort of reader-writer who creatively and freely participates in a process of constructing meaning, and actually rewrites the text. At the same time, by creating correlations between the modern and ancient texts, the reader actively joins the cultural practice of the community to which he or she belongs. The reader creates the relations between the hypertext and the antecedent text and connects them by means of the symbolization processes created in Jewish culture throughout the generations. Thus the audience of readers becomes part of the long tradition of intergenerational transmission. The riddles that the new story poses to its readers, the pleasure of the dialectical interplay between 'old' and 'new', the various possibilities of connection between all the pieces of the mosaic into a meaningful picture—all turned joint study into a fascinating experience.

The book's chapters are built one on top of the other as a continuous dialogue between the ancient storytellers and their successors. Even though each chapter may be read independently, the evolution of the story is presented both as a dialogue between one chapter and the next, and also between all the chapters and themselves. The reading I shall propose later is one that defines the intertextual approach as an intergenerational sociocultural practice. The examples selected for discussion

emerged in the course of my research and educational work and reflect my personal choice. I offer them to my readers as the opening of a discussion and an invitation for continued research and teaching.

First and foremost I gratefully acknowledge my students. The intellectual curiosity engendered by the course, the endless possibilities raised by the participants, and their contribution to the signification of the text, taught me about the intrinsic creative potential of the intertextual research method. Special thanks are due to my colleague Professor Gissi Sarig for her precise reading of the manuscript and her many useful comments. Her meticulousness coupled with her infinite curiosity were a constant source of encouragement and inspiration. My thanks, too, to Dr Noam Zion of the Shalom Hartman Institute, whose support for this project and his pertinent criticism were particularly significant. I am grateful to my friend Professor Amira Eran, whose insights nourished my thinking even after I completed the writing of the Hebrew version of the book. Her insights find expression in the conclusion chapter, which was rewritten for the translated version of the book.

Special thanks are due to my publisher, Professor David Clines of Sheffield Phoenix Press, who guided me patiently and attentively throughout the publication process. I also owe a special debt of gratitude to my translator, Anthony Berris from Kibbutz Beit Haemek. Translating a book on intertextuality in Hebrew culture is no easy task, and I thank him for his patience, thoughtfulness, and dedicated and accurate work.

And finally, thanks are due to the Kibbutzim College of Education in Tel Aviv for its support in publishing the book, and its translation into English.

Shula Keshet

Introduction

On three occasions the biblical narrator repeats a plot story in which the Matriarch Sarah, and later Rebekah, are handed over (or almost handed over) to a foreign king by Abraham and Isaac respectively (Gen. 12; 20; 26). The same situation with role changes also occurs elsewhere in the Bible: in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39), and in the book of Esther. In all these stories we can identify a common basic plot, and also a permanent system of pre-derived motifs: the Hebrew protagonist enters foreign territory and is at the mercy of his/her hosts; as a consequence of existential distress he/she is cast into an erotic relationship with the foreign host. Only divine intervention rescues him/her from the imbroglio; a different and even converse variation of the pattern occurs in the story of Samson and in the book of Ruth, in which a Gentile woman enters foreign territory and binds her destiny to a Hebrew man.[1] This narrative pattern is also repeated in the homiletics of the Jewish sages, who address the basic biblical story and seemingly rewrite it, and reappears in modern Hebrew literature. Among the stories recurring along the time continuum we can clearly mark intertextual relations whose precise nature we shall examine later.

In all the stories we shall discuss the plot story is about an erotic encounter between a Hebrew man or woman and a representative of the foreign world. The use of man–woman relations to mark a 'breaking of bounds' (national, class, cultural) is universal. Numerous stories in world literature are fed by the tension created between a man and woman on two sides of a divide: love between a lady and a servant, between a black man and a white woman, between an occupying soldier and a woman from the occupied people, and so forth. My approach holds that the recurring story seeks to form the dialectical tension between Jew and Gentile by means of the metaphor of man–woman relations. In some cases it is the woman entering—or being forced to enter—an erotic

1. Yair Zakovitch, *Mikra'ot be'eretz hamar'ot* (Through the Looking Glass: Reflection Stories in the Bible) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), p. 71.

relationship with a foreign king as, for example, in the case of Sarah in Egypt (Gen. 12), in the palace of Abimelech king of Gerar (Gen. 20), or in the book of Esther, and in others the roles are reversed when the man is Jewish and the woman Gentile, as in the case of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39).

Intertextual observation does not stop at identification of the directed formal connection with the surface structures of the works, that is, genre similarity, narrative technique, and so forth, all the phenomena with which traditional literary critique has engaged under the headings 'Sources', 'Influences' or 'Insertions'. Intertextual dialogue obliges the reader to define the relations between the hypertext and the antecedent text, to understand what is the cultural and ideological content carried by the earlier text to the new one, and how meaning is created as a result of the overt or covert dialogue between the two.[2] Thus, according to Jonathan Culler and others, the practice involved in a reading of this kind obliges us to waive the assumption of the text's autonomy, since the deeper basis of the work relies on ancient texts, and the specific work has meaning only because certain things were written prior to it.[3] Constructing the metatext therefore mandates seeing in the earlier works—with which the new text holds a dialogical discourse—charged markers whose contribution to the creation of the present text's meaning must be elucidated.

Indeed, the questions guiding my work in this book relate first and foremost to the issue of meaning: What is the meta-theme that lies at the basis of the recurring pattern? Is there special significance in shaping the plot by means of man–woman relations? When is Hebrew/Jewish represented by a man and when by a woman, or by a couple? And most importantly: Can we offer an in-depth explanation of the phenomenon of the recurring story that goes beyond the influence of literary convention. In other words, what is the ideological role of a story repeatedly related by Jewish culture to itself at different times and in different places?

2. See Ziva Ben-Porat, 'Beyn textualiut' (Intertextuality), *Hasifrut* 34.2 (1985), pp. 170-78; Yedidya Yitzhaki, *Hapsukim hasmuyim min ha'ayin: al yetzirat A.B. Yehoshua* (The Hidden Verses: On the Work of A.B. Yehoshua) (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1992), pp. 15-17.

3. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 102-103.

The Structure of the Book

Later on in this introduction I propose to the reader a theoretical framework for discussion of the recurring pattern in which I briefly address intertextuality both in a broad context and as a unique practice in Jewish culture. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 are devoted to the construction of two models of the antecedent text: (a) the story of Abraham who hands over his wife to a foreign king. In this model it is the woman who is forced into a relationship with a foreign king ('the feminine model'); (b) the second model addresses the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in which the Hebrew man finds himself in an erotic relationship with a Gentile woman ('the masculine model'). In the fourth chapter I discuss the book of Esther, a late biblical text that maintains a dialogical relationship with the antecedent texts that preceded it, including the story of Sarah in Egypt and that of Joseph. This chapter enables observation of the creation of an inner intertextual work in the Bible itself; variations of rereading the biblical texts in ancient and late Midrashic literature will serve as a historical bridge between the appearance of the story in Antiquity, and its reappearance in modern texts. The fifth chapter deals with the later incarnations of the pattern and its reshaping in the story by Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', published in 1943, and the sixth is devoted to the cinematic work by Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, *The Touch*. In this film Bergman creates a similar structure and deals with Jewish–Gentile relations using Christian iconic tools and from the viewpoint of the non-Jewish other. In the seventh chapter I expose the reader to thoughts on a recent Israeli literary work, the 1994 novel *Inta Omri*, by poet-author Semadar Herzfeld, at whose center is a love affair between a Israeli Jewish woman and a Palestinian man, a plot whose action takes place in Israel against the backdrop of the Intifada in the late 1980s.

In the following discussion on the intertextuality phenomenon I present only the main points to the reader. Over the last three decades the research library in this sphere has been considerably enriched, and the inquiring reader will find numerous studies both on intertextuality in general, and inner-biblical intertextuality in particular.[4] I therefore

4. See, for example, a comprehensive review of the various trends in intertextuality research in Michael Worton and Judith Still, *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990). The introduction provides a historical overview of the theories of various philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle, to the modern philosophy on this subject: Bakhtin, Kristeva, Bloom, Barthes, Derrida, Riffaterre, etc. A rich bibliography of contemporary studies on intertextuality and the Bible

decided not to repeat and summarize general theoretical discussions that are available to the reader, and focus on an attentive reading of the texts I have chosen for the main discussion. The theories I have chosen from the overall pool, particularly those that contribute to the specific discussion, will be presented in the body of the text and in the interpretation of 'the great meta-text' with which the book engages.

The textual examples selected emerged in the course of my research and educational work, and do not, of course, include all the recurring representations of the subject structure in either the Bible or Jewish and Israeli culture. They represent my personal choice from the pool, and I offer them to the reader as an opening to a discussion and an invitation for continued research and teaching.

Intertextuality: The Term and its Transformations

The term 'intertextuality' has undergone many changes since it first came to attention of readers and critics. The dialogical principle was first presented in Mikhail Bakhtin's work in 1920.[5] Some forty years later Julia Kristeva presented Bakhtin's dialogical theory in France. She highlighted Bakhtin's unique contribution to the dynamic interpretation of the literary text. According to Kristeva, he was the first to base the claim that a literary work does not exist solely in and of itself, and is fulfilled from its dialogical relationship with other texts. According to Bakhtin's concept, 'the literary word' is a meeting point of textual layers, not a point that has one set meaning. In a certain sense the conclusion emerging from this assertion sees in every text a derivative text, and in every sentence a quotation, or as Kristeva puts it: 'Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another'.[6]

can be found in the following: Patricia Tull, 'Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible', *CurRes* 8 (2000), pp. 59-90; Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Dana Nolan Fewell (ed.), *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); L.M. Eslinger, 'Inner-Biblical Exegesis and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Question of Category', *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 47-58.

5. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (trans. Helene Iswolsky; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. R.W. Rostel; Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1973).

6. J. Kristeva, *Semiotike* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 146; *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine, and S. Roudiez; New York: Colombia University Press, 1980), p. 66; Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 37.

Bakhtin's statement on the literary word as the meeting point of textual layers is amply demonstrated by an example from the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39), with which I shall deal in Chapter 3. The narrator describes the last seduction scene of Potiphar's wife, which is preceded by prolonged and insistent verbal pleadings. At a certain point, when the house is empty, the woman crosses the final boundary and the verbal seduction becomes an act: 'And she seized him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me". And he left his garment in her hand and he fled and went out' (Gen. 39.12).

I have no doubt at all that the attentive reader of Joseph's story cannot but call to mind two other instances in which his fate is linked to a garment: the story of the coat of many colors made for him by his father, and the very same coat that was dipped into goat's blood and brought to the aged father as evidence of his dear son's death. At that moment the word 'garment', then, creates a meeting point between three events connecting Joseph, a garment, and a foul deed linked with betrayal. To this is added the ambivalent meaning of the root of the Hebrew word *beged*, which refers both to a garment and a cover, and to the Hebrew verb 'to betray'.

'Everything in Language Is Intertextual'

Post-structuralist theoreticians such as Roland Barthes extended the borders of the term even further and applied it to almost every linguistic phenomenon. Every word, every linguistic unit, became intertextual. Ferdinand de Saussure contends that everything in written language existed previously in spoken language, and therefore each word we learn in childhood is the result of a quotation or imitation of what we have already heard. Intertextuality was therefore applied not only to discrete literary texts, since reality itself became a 'text', and culture in toto was defined as 'intertext'. Hence, as Ziva Ben-Porat contends, intertextuality in its inclusive meaning became 'inevitable, given that it is the form of its existence, the signification mechanism of the literary text in its entirety, and it applies to all cultural texts, to all the codes and communication systems. It is the competence common to writer and reader and is not a matter of choice.'[7]

7. Ben-Porat, 'Beyn textualiut', p. 171, after Kristeva.

If everything that has been written is indeed a 'quotation' from earlier sources, this creates a paradoxical situation: according to the all-embracing definition, the concept of intertextuality contains all the manifestations of written language, and thus becomes tautologous, an inclusive philosophical declaration on the nature of linguistic-cultural communication, and can not be used as an analytical tool. Enriching intertextual reading must rely on discrete rhetorical structures built on recurrence and analogies that can be clearly identified in the course of the reading. Instead of the broad term 'all-containing' and in order to offer the commentator a more discrete tool, Ziva Ben-Porat proposes the term 'rhetorical intertextuality', which is the result of choice (not necessarily conscious), and refers to specific literary and aesthetic objects. According to Ben-Porat, rhetorical intertextuality only exists between literary texts, and cannot be applied to the products of non-literary writing, translation, or writing about texts.[8] In her study on intertextuality in the book of Ruth, Ellen van Wolde (1997) reached a similar conclusion.[9] She contends that there is no point in seeking intertextuality in a diffuse universe, just as there is no meaning in defining single drops of water in a big river. The conclusion is that for a time, at least, we should ignore the fascinating insights that emerge from the broad, overarching term and focus on the intertextual connections that can be more specifically identified.[10]

A Wealth of Legitimate Reading Possibilities

By reducing the term to a system of rhetorical intertextual connections, that is, discrete connections, not all the problems of the dialogue between the reader and the work are resolved. If the reader's cultural inventory is not identical to that of the writer (which is usually the case), then who determines which are legitimate intertextual relations and which are not? Who determines the 'correct' nature of dialogical relations from the moment they are established? There is no simple answer to this question. Barthes, for example, speaks about the reading process as an encounter with 'a mirage of citations' that are elusive and whose origin the reader cannot clearly identify (the feeling of 'déjà lu'). 'We

8. Ben-Porat, 'Beyn textualiut', pp. 174-78.

9. E. van Wolde, 'Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar', in *Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies: A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997), p. 429.

10. See also P.R. Noble, 'Esau, Tamar and Joseph: Criteria for Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions', *VT* 52 (2002), pp. 219-52.

know now', Barthes says, 'that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.' The text, therefore, is not a single closed body of writing, specific context imprisoned in the book or between its covers, but a web of different codes, blurred footprints alluding to other things outside them.[11] Consciously or unconsciously, writers bring their entire inventory to the writing process, and the readers, who are also not innocent subjects, have within them a multitude of texts and bring with them all the readings they have made in the past, those that are remembered clearly and those that have left only elusive signs in the memory.[12]

Furthermore, the literary word creates a sort of crossroads at which several dialogues take place simultaneously: with writers and their entire cultural baggage, with the addressees who also have various lexicons within them, and with the overall cultural context with which the work is created. S.Y. Agnon, for instance, in his story 'The Lady and the Peddler', which I shall discuss in Chapter 5, brings to the writing process his wealth of knowledge on the Bible and Midrash in the context of the Joseph and Potiphar's wife affair, knowledge that he blends into his story in the form of direct and indirect quotations, and he can only rely on the knowledge of intelligent readers that will help them to identify the allusions and decode the intertextual connection created by the narrator between his new story and the ancient one. The context in which the story is created—Europe at the end of World War Two, at the height of the annihilation of the Jewish people by Nazi Germany—creates the story's sociopolitical meaning. Without knowledge of the historical context, the story reads like a strange 'vampire' story with no relevant meaning. From the dialogue created between the three poles (subject-writer, addressee, and context) the word is accorded dual status: 'horizontal' (writer-addressee) and 'vertical' (text-context).

Studies on reception theory, a prominent research field since the 1970s, shifted the focus of observation from study of the text as an object in and of itself, to understanding the process of fulfillment of the text's semantic potential as it is accomplished by the reader. The basic assumption of mainstream study of reception theory states that the work is

11. R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (trans. Stephen Heath; New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 146.

12. R. Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 16; Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, pp. 100-105.

ostensibly recreated by the reader by means of a continuous process that takes place in the course of the reading. Readers bring to the dialogue their psychological and cultural worlds, together with their skills, knowledge, and previous experiences, while the text activates them with a variety of rhetorical means to steer and guide them in fulfilling the work's inherent potential. The meeting point is between the positions and intentions embedded in the text and the reader, with the entirety of his or her individual and cultural personality. In other words, fulfillment of the work takes place from within the guidelines and limitations imposed by the text on the reading process, in accordance with skills, and also the limitations of the reader's personality.[13]

From this understanding I am inclined to agree with Timothy Beal's assertion that every reading is in fact a type of writing, production of a certain meaning from within the inexhaustible pool.[14] By means of the intertextual dynamic, readers become writers who add their voices to the chorus that came before them, and the specific interpretation proposed by various readers will be accepted by us as 'logical' if we manage to identify the point of departure chosen by them from the dialogical arena the text offers them either consciously or unconsciously. The second conclusion reached by Beal is that the term 'intertextuality' (even in its more reduced, rhetorical sense) accordingly becomes an 'umbrella term' under which different interpretations can reside as sub-categories—synchronic, diachronic, typological, and allegorical—and necessarily as 'abstractions'. These abstractions impose the inclusive strategy chosen by different readers down the generations on the process of constructing the meaning.

On Intertextuality in Jewish Culture

Thus far I have addressed intertextuality in general terms. I shall now devote some remarks to the character of the phenomenon in Jewish culture. The uniqueness of the practice of intertextuality in Jewish culture derives from the special status of the Scriptures. As we know,

13. For a review of this field, see the studies by R. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984); E. Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader Response Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1987); R.S. Suleiman and I. Crossman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

14. T.K. Beal, 'Ideology and Intertextuality: Surplus of Meaning and Controlling the Means of Production', in Fewell (ed.), *Reading between Texts*, pp. 28-31.

biblical literature was formed over centuries, layer upon layer, and later works correspond with works that preceded them and which had already become part of the cultural inventory of the Jewish people.[15]

It is worthy of mention, says Yair Zakovitch,[16] that engagement with recurring patterns in the biblical story is both new and old. Analogies of this kind were already drawn by the Jewish sages, and even though their approach is not poetic but educational, we can, in Zakovitch's opinion and employing due caution, use the analogies they revealed and indicate overt and covert connections between ancient and later texts. A similar position can be found in Daniel Boyarin's important study on intertextuality in the Midrash.[17] The writers of the Bible and the Midrashim lived in a traditional society that safeguarded and sanctified the literature of the cultural group to which they belonged. They employed the practice of 'intertextuality' as self-evident, even though the term was unknown to them. The biblical and midrashic writer relied on the writings of his predecessors—usually consciously—and felt that he was but another link in the chain of the literary tradition he both preserved and renewed. According to Boyarin, there is, in fact, no text, including the classical writings of writers such as Shakespeare or Dostoevsky, that is a product of an independent and spontaneous action. Every text is subject to the constraints of the literary system of which it is part; every text gives expression to the ideology of its cultural group; and every text is also dialogical.[18] In the reading of the midrashic sages, Boyarin identifies a development (sometimes a 'baroque' development, as he puts it) of interpretative strategies embedded in the Bible itself: the Midrash, in its dialogical and dialectical fashion, bows to the dialogical and dialectical materials that are in the biblical text from the outset. Following Gerald Bruns,[19] the scholar emphasizes the intertextual writing process as one that is both conscious and guided: the texts are formed reflectively so

15. Over the last two decades the field dealing with intertextuality in the Bible and epigraphic literature has yielded an abundance of studies. A comprehensive review of the various trends and also a detailed bibliography can be found in Tull, 'Intertextuality and the Hebrew Scriptures', pp. 59-90.

16. Zakovitch, *Mikra'ot be'eretz hamar'ot*, pp. 12-13.

17. D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

18. D. Boyarin, *Midrash tanna'im, intertextualiut vekriat mekhilta* (Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash) (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2011), p. 38.

19. G. Bruns, 'Midrash and Allegory', in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 625-46.

they can be learned by the readers in precisely that way, namely, as texts that resonate with one another. One textual element sheds light on another, late texts correspond with antecedent texts, and they in turn will influence the texts that follow them.[20]

The rewriting is also influenced by ideological points of departure. Together with creative license, restrictions were also put in place. The Torah, as a text influenced by lacunae, Boyarin says, addresses 'strong' readers but also restricts them. The midrashic sages were guided by codes that enabled them to find, and even create, new meanings, but they were also restricted to a certain type of interpretation that would not deviate from the ideological patterns guiding their culture. We must always ask ourselves who determines the ways whereby meanings are produced, and what is the worldview that guides their recommendations. The way in which the midrashic sages read the Bible, for instance, is not based solely on the practice of filling gaps, but is bound up in a process of creating meaning in accordance with a strategy laid out by the spiritual authorities, in this case the Second Temple sages.[21] The question of the 'legitimacy' of this or other readings is thus replaced by a range of questions of a different kind: What are the strategies whereby the dominant ideology oversees the mechanism of creating meaning, or by what means do the sources of authority permit deviation from the ideological consensus and allow the readers the possibility of autonomous, even subversive reading? From the outset the situation is presented as dialectical: despite the authority of the ideological consensus, namely the authorities overseeing the mechanisms of creating meaning, in their narrative interpretation the midrashic sages succeed in realizing an impressive area of freedom. Boyarin attributes this creative freedom to the poetic character of the Midrash. In his understanding, poetic texts are entitled to make free use of linguistic material without displaying a required commitment to the original context in which this material first appeared. Modern-day poet are not perceived as 'copying' if they quote from an antecedent work, and their integrity is not called into question if in so doing they change the original meaning of the text. Indeed, the modern-day texts I present in the later chapters of this book provide the reader-interpreter with a large degree of creative license and unending possibilities of open intertextual patterning, which is not limited by over-coding.

20. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, pp. 16-17.
21. See also Beal, 'Ideology and Intertextuality', pp. 28-31.

Diachronic Intertextuality

Two different types of intertextual relations are demonstrated in the book: diachronic and synchronic. The cultural-collective discourse is characterized by the diachronic connection along the time continuum. Every culture creates a continuous dialogue between later and antecedent works. Fragments of ancient myths become building material in the later stories, or in the well-known words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'mythical discourse builds its ideological palaces with the debris of an earlier social discourse'.

The common cultural pool is what creates the 'discourse community', or as Robert Alter puts it, 'A canon is above all a transhistorical textual community'.[22] Recognition of the texts conveyed from generation to generation and returning to them is what establishes the community. While the recurring story preserves the cultural group's worldview, it also changes it. Intergenerational writing in which later texts correspond with antecedent ones relies—at least according to the writers' basic assumptions—on an informed community of readers that recognized the antecedent texts, forms links between the new text and its antecedent, and connects them by means of symbolization processes created in the communital culture. Each work added to the pool conducts several complex dialogues simultaneously: with the antecedent work, the changing addressee, and the overall historical-cultural context wherein it is created. Recognition of the texts conveyed from generation to generation and the return to them is what establishes the community, and a story retold in it is accorded canonical status.[23]

An intertextual dialogue therefore mandates that informed readers define the relationship between a meta-text and its antecedent; to understand which cultural and ideational content the antecedent text brings with it to the new one, and how meaning is created as a result of the overt or covert discourse between the two.[24] But as mentioned above, there is no single authoritative meaning for texts. The Bible and the canonical post-biblical literature offer the later writers a ready-to-use lexicon, and even an ideational-conceptual framework serving as a referential basis for their writing, but the writers referencing this canon are free to choose which voice from the multiplicity of voices with which

22. R. Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scriptures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 5.
23. Alter, *Canon and Creativity*, p. 18.
24. See Ben-Porat, 'Beyn textualiut'.

they seek to connect. Study of the transformation of the recurring narrative in the Bible itself proves the ability of the writers in the discourse community to shape the antecedent markers in a variety of ways, when they clearly rely on the readers—members of the same community—to identify the pleasing playfulness with which the familiar codes were created, and also to appreciate the license guiding the writers to introduce changes and revisions to the familiar pattern. It seems that these writers identify in the recurring narrative on the exiled Jew a poetic language that meets their artistic needs, even when they criticize or even oppose the values attending the ancient cluster of meaning integrated into their work. Thus, for instance, the book of Esther, a text with which I shall deal extensively in Chapter 4, makes its way—almost forces its way—into the canon composed of antecedent authoritative texts and demands the right to make a different voice heard. Side by side with the innovation and the creation of the different, non-consensual different voice, intertextuality safeguards the sacred texts from the danger of petrification; it makes the ancient text speak again and preserves its vitality through an unceasing process of quotation, change, and replacement.[25]

Synchronic Intertextuality

As I have mentioned, the diachronic course focuses on identifying the 'genetic sources' embedded in the text in order to learn from them about writers' ideological intentions. Synchronic reading, on the other hand, positions two texts side by side since in the course of their reading the readers discover the analogical qualities embedded in both. These relationships are not imperative. They originate in the personal, sometimes random associations that different texts kindle in us. Some can be interpreted against a universal background, such as, for instance, archetypical subjects, travel adventures, a Bildungsroman model, images whose shaping is based on a familiar human typology, all of which can arouse the synchronic intertextual reading of educated readers. Together with the analogies emerging from the world of universal images, whose origin is human, a converse dynamic sometimes occurs: the creation of analogies that in fact originate in the readers' unique psychological world. Two textual phenomena connect in their imagination, and what connects them is sometimes unreasoned and even not fully clarified. Further study usually reveals hidden connections that can be rationalized in both the universal and unique cultural context, but sometimes the connections

25. Fewell, *Reading between Texts*, p. 14.

remain ambiguous and cannot be clarified. This ambiguousness is in the nature of every great work which will always contain the same enigmatic surplus that touches the secret chords of the reader's soul with its subconscious materials.

Ingmar Bergman's film, *The Touch*, which will be discussed in Chapter 6, is a fine example of the synchronic intertextual process that was occupying my thoughts when I first saw the film. Discussion of the cinematic work will facilitate a comparison and confrontation between the Jewish and Christian discourse on both the universal level—man–woman relations as a metaphor of breaking bounds—and also on the ideational level as part of the complex discourse relations between Judaism and Christianity that are built on a common wealth of images. Together with the Jewish parallels, an example of a non-Jewish response will be added, an artistic testimony representing the other side.

And finally, numerous Israeli artists in all spheres of renewed creation in the State of Israel—prose, poetry, drama, the plastic arts, and so forth—are continuing the dialogue with the ancient sources, and creating a sort of modern 'Midrashim'. Semadar Herzfeld's novel, *Inta Omri*, in which the basic paradigm is completely reversed, is but one of many examples of the creative way in which new dialogues are created under different social and cultural conditions.[26]

In summary, intertextual practice therefore possesses special status in Jewish culture. Conscious quotation from ancient texts is a dominant element in Jewish cultural writing, and it enables a fascinating study of intergenerational discourse that continues from biblical literature through post-biblical literature, the Midrashim, medieval literature, the Enlightenment, and modern Hebrew literature of recent generations.

26. The return of the Jewish people to a tangible territory and political independence created a renewed dialogue with the biblical text. The Israeli landscape that corresponds with biblical landscape descriptions, ancient structures such as the Sacrifice of Isaac myth, for instance, are proposed anew as relevant, topical patterns of a description of the political situation in Israel. Among recent studies published in English on the relationship between the Bible and modern writing in Israel, see for example, R. Kartun-Blum, *Profane Scriptures: Reflections on the Dialogue with the Bible in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999); D.C. Jacobson, *Does David Still Play Before You? Israeli Poetry and the Bible* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997); Vered Shemtov, 'The Bible in Contemporary Israeli Literature: Text and Place in Zeruya Shalev's *Husband and Wife*, and Michal Gouvrin's *Snapshots*', *HS* 47 (2006), pp. 363-84; Glenda Abramson, 'Israeli Drama and the Bible: Kings on Stage', *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 28 (2004), pp. 63-82.

The following chapter, in which I embark on the diachronic intertextual journey, will focus on the recurring story in the stories of the Patriarchs: Abram, the father of the nation, hands over his wife Sarah to a foreign king.

1

'SAY YOU ARE MY SISTER'

A Story Begins

In this chapter we shall read the stories of the Patriarchs and follow the 'triple story': the Patriarchs (Abraham on two occasions, and Isaac once) hand over their wives—or are prepared to hand them over—to the harem of a foreign king in order to save themselves. In all three stories the man asks his wife to declare that she is his 'sister'. In the first two (Gen. 12; 20) the false declaration leads to the woman being taken into the king's harem. There is divine intervention, the king and all his household are afflicted by plagues and the truth of the woman's status as a married woman emerges. The king reproaches the Patriarch for his deceit and the woman is restored to her husband together with numerous gifts. In the third story (Gen. 26) the declaration 'she is my sister' does not lead to the harsh outcomes of the two previous stories.

In all three stories the man–woman encounter also represents an intercultural one. The family's wanderings from Mesopotamia to Canaan, to Egypt and back, show that the scene of the action is not restricted to the Promised Land. The geographical and cultural limits are wide, and enable the chosen family's encounters with rich and varied cultures: Mesopotamia, Canaan, Egypt, and Philistia. Canaan too, as emerges from the description of the war between the four and five kings in Genesis 14, introduced Abraham to a multitude of different peoples that were in the region at the time and engaged in conquest and settlement.

Bible research assumes that Abraham's family belonged to the movement of nomads known in Akkadian documents as 'habiru' (or in the Huri transliteration as 'aviru'), and some derive the name 'Hebrew' from it (the Hebrew verb *avor* means 'to pass from one place to another'). Over time the term was used to describe groups that had stopped wandering and settled as emigrants or foreign residents in the cities or countries willing to make use of their services as workers, soldiers, and so forth.[1]

1. Y. Levi, 'Habiru', *Ha'encyclopedia Hamikra'it* (The Biblical Encyclopedia) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1956); M. Greenberg, *The Hab/piru* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1955).

Habiru does not signify a tribe or people but a way of life. The Semitic element of the group is indeed dominant, but it also contained other elements. The nomads, who had severed their national or tribal ties, lived as shepherds, hunters, and sometimes as warriors. When circumstances allowed, they tilled the soil, entered the cities, and forged an alliance with the local population that enabled them to live among them as emigrants or residents, at least for a while. Life of this kind also emerges from the stories of Abraham: he wandered from place to place with his flocks, went down to Egypt during a famine, he had a group of soldier-warriors with whose help he rescued his nephew Lot who had been taken captive, and he did not have the clearly defined rights of a resident, as emerges from the Cave of Machpela affair. Abraham's contacts with the local population include episodes of various kinds: his encounter with the King of Sodom and with Melchizedek King of Salem following the war between the four kings and the five kings, an episode in which he proves both his military prowess and his munificence (Gen. 14); the encounter with Abimelech and Phicol, captain of his troops, following a dispute over a well, in which an alliance was forged between Abraham and the heads of the local settlement (Gen. 21); or the negotiations with the Hittites over the purchase of the Cave of Machpela (Gen. 23), which attest not only to Abraham's insecure civil status in Canaan, but also to the respect given him by the local dignitaries who find it hard to refuse him. In all of the above-mentioned stories Abraham is presented as an eminent patriarch who, although he gains the respect of the local rulers, in his own eyes and those of his hosts is seen as a foreign guest. What, then, defines Abraham's uniqueness? Is he (and are we) already aware of what sets him apart from others? The descriptions show that the national frameworks are diffuse, the Semitic element is also dominant in Canaan, and there is apparently no clear difference between Abraham's family and the other nomads in the Canaan region. The difference defined by the Bible is a mainly spiritual one: belief in one god.

As opposed to the other encounters in which Abraham the Patriarch gained the respect of his hosts, who were even aided by him in situations of dispute and strife, the dominant element in the 'you are my sister' episodes is the existential anxiety of the stranger, the exile, in a world that is unfamiliar to him both morally and socially. It is this anxiety that causes the manipulation that drives the plot, and the Patriarch escapes from the imbroglio with his image tarnished from both the human and moral standpoints.

Let the Story Speak for Itself

We shall begin with the first story of the three. At this stage the use of interpretation will be minimal and will mainly refer to questions touching upon necessary filling of gaps. We shall let the story speak for itself. The first story appears in Gen. 12.10-20. Shortly after the commandment 'Go forth from your land and your birth-place and your father's house to the land I will show you', which is accompanied by a promise: 'And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great'. God guides him to 'the land beyond': 'to the land I will show you'. At this point the Promised Land has no name or title, and is a blank space that can be filled with undefined yearnings. The reader is not told why Canaan was chosen and there is no explanation of why Abraham must uphold his covenant with God there, and not anywhere else. Abraham 'passes through' the land. The Scripture uses a verb whose meaning is the opposite of remaining, of putting down roots. He built altars in Shechem and Bethel, but the first hardships of famine force him to leave the Promised Land as well. Abraham continues his wandering to Egypt, Land of the Nile, to sojourn there.

In the meantime we know but little about the family of the Chosen One. In the short exposition that opens the stories of Abraham (Gen. 11.26-32) he is one of three brothers: one, Haran, dies in his father's lifetime in his homeland, Ur of the Chaldees. Later the narrator tells us details of the marriages of the other two brothers: 'And Abram and Nahor took themselves wives (*Va-yikah Avram Ve-Nahor*). The name of Abram's wife was Sarai and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah' (Gen. 11.29). The English translation of the opening sentence is inaccurate, since in English there is no distinction between use of the verb in the singular and the plural. The Bible relates the story of the brothers' marriages succinctly and in the Hebrew singular (*Va-yikah)*, as if they were one body and one act. But the following verse undermines the common basis: Abram marries Sarai whereas his brother Nahor marries Milcah, the daughter of his deceased brother. The narrator goes on to tell us that the dead brother, Haran, had two daughters, Milcah and Iscah. Except for this reference, Iscah is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible.

The incidental comparison between the two brothers shows that Nahor chose his niece—his kith and kin—to be his wife, whereas Sarai's ancestry is not mentioned. The Midrashic sages reacted to the blank space and filled it in their own way, and according to them Iscah is

Sarai.[2] But it appears that the biblical narrator leaves other signs along the reader's path: Iscah appears on the story's stage without a meaningful role in the familial-genealogical lineup that usually makes no mention of women, and also not in the narrative plot as it develops later. Is it possible that her only role is to allude to an unfulfilled possibility? In other words, to highlight the fact that Abraham took a wife from outside the family circle? And if this was indeed the narrator's intention, what meaning should be accorded to this fact? The answer to this question, as will become clear later in this discussion, is of considerable import in constructing the ideological significance of the recurring pattern, 'Say, you are my sister'.

Another matter regarding Sarah is brought to our attention before the Abraham story unfolds: 'And Sarai was barren, she had no child'. Once again the reader is provided with superfluous information, this time with a redundancy: 'barren' and 'had no child'. The representative signifier of Sarai's nature is therefore in genealogical emptiness, her family connection is blocked with regard to both the past, and in the meantime to the future too. It may be said at this juncture of the story that Sarai is 'antigenic'.[3] In other words, Sarai actually personifies 'the other' in Terach's family cell since from an anthropological viewpoint Iscah daughter of Haran is less 'other' than Sarai. The otherness in her is not yet clear. When reminding ourselves that the opening of the Abraham stories focuses on the divine commandment for severance from the past, from home and country, from father and mother, then Abraham's marriage to Sarai, not Iscah, can allude to a relationship based on free

2. Cf. Josephus, *Ant*. 1.6.5; *Sanh*. 69a; *Meg*. 14a. Reuven Firestone calculates the ages of those involved and rejects the premise that Haran was Iscah/Sarai's father. According to biblical chronology, Abraham was ten years older than Sarai and two years older than Haran. If Haran was Sarai's father he would have been eight years old when she was born. See n. 24 in Firestone's article: 'Difficulties in Keeping a Beautiful Wife: The Legend of Abraham and Sarah in Jewish and Islamic Tradition', *JJS* 42 (1991), pp. 197-214 (203).

3. Sharon Pace Jeansonne also addresses the genealogical preface in which Sarah is first introduced, and proposes a different explanation. According to her proposal, in the first stories about Abraham's family the narrator leaves an unresolved tension regarding the identity of the inheritor of the Abrahamic legacy. In her opinion Sarah's barrenness, which is emphasized in the first chapters of the Abrahamic story, alludes more than once to the fact that the possible heir of the Abrahamic dynasty is Lot. Only after the encounter with the herald angels is the question of the heir resolved, and Sarah becomes a full partner in the Abrahamic covenant. Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 14-15. Cf. David J.A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 69-80.

choice, and perhaps on a spiritual partnership,[4] not on the specific coercion found in kinship relations in which marriages are arranged to one degree or another by clan interests. It is against this backdrop that the episodes in Egypt and Gerar are given a charged, even troubling meaning.

The narrator does not expand on Abraham himself. At this stage the reader is unaware of why Abraham was chosen by God. He obeys the commandment 'Go forth from your land' with action. God appears to him, commands him, and he obeys. He goes from Haran to Canaan, builds an altar, wanders the land of Canaan from north to south, to the Negev, and later, when famine strikes, he goes down to Egypt:

> And there was famine in the land and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was grave in the land. And it happened as he drew near to the border of Egypt that he said to Sarai his wife, 'Look, I know you are a beautiful woman, and so when the Egyptians see you and say, "She is his wife", they will kill me while you they will let live. Say, please, that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me on your count and I shall live because of you.' And it happened when Abram came into Egypt that the Egyptians saw the woman was very beautiful. And Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And it went well with Abram on her count, and he had sheep and cattle and donkeys and male and female slaves and she-asses and camels. And the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with terrible plagues because of Sarai the wife of Abram. And Pharaoh summoned Abram and said: 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, "She is my sister", so that I took her to me as wife? Now, here is your wife. Take her and get out!' And Pharaoh appointed men over him and they sent him out, with his wife and all he had.[5]

4. Numerous attempts have been made to defend Abraham, who presents Sarah as his 'sister'. Some rely on the endearment 'my sister, my bride' from the Song of Solomon, and contend that Abraham uses an endearment accepted in Hebrew culture so therefore he is not actually lying but treading the narrow path between truth and lie; see Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 95. There are also those who rely on the extensive use of the words 'my sister' in Egyptian love poetry. See Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 8, 12, 13. It appears that the Midrashic sages also noted this allusion and viewed Sarah as a 'sister in a way of life'. Many Midrashim accord Sarah prophetic powers and relate that she assisted her husband in the conversion of women. See, for example, *Gen. R.*, *Parasha* 39.14, *Tanh.*, *Lekh Lekha* 12, etc. Islamic sources also interpret the term 'my sister' as Abraham's 'sister in religion'. Cited in Firestone, 'Difficulties in Keeping a Beautiful Wife', p. 200.

5. I am using here the English translation supplied by R. Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998).

It is only now, before the entry into Egypt, that we hear him speak for the first time:

> Look, I know you are a beautiful woman, and so when the Egyptians see you and say, 'She is his wife', they will kill me while you they will let live. Say, please, that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me on your count and I shall stay alive because of you.

The Medieval commentators Nachmanides (1194–1270) and Sforno (1468–1550) attempted to defend this odd proposal and explain the pragmatic logic which in their opinion motivated Abraham to make it: if the woman was considered to be his sister, namely, free for marriage, potential suitors would then negotiate with her 'brother' in order to obtain her hand by legal means, not by force. This would enable Abraham to gain time, perhaps until the famine ended, and then the two would be able to return to Canaan. On the other hand, if it became known that she was his wife, Abraham would possibly be killed and then they would be able to do as they wished with her. This explanation still does not obscure the egotistical character of the words, 'so that it will go well with me on your count and I shall stay alive because of you' (Gen. 12.13).

The traditional Jewish interpretation attempts to deflect the criticism from husband–wife relations to the relationship between Abraham and his god: Abraham does not trust God to save him from danger and fulfill his assurances, so he tries to ensure his continued existence by human manipulative means. On the face of it, it seems that the question of Abraham's moral conduct toward Sarai is not at the centre of their explanation. Their critical stance is only covertly revealed. A fine example of the ancient commentators' quandary regarding Abraham's moral conduct can be found in the ways in which the Jewish sages attempt to add to the biblical plot Abraham's ostensible efforts to protect his beautiful wife until he lost control of the situation. Filling in the gaps emphasizes what the original story omitted:

> When they arrived at the gate of Egypt, Abraham said to Sarah: My girl, Egypt is a place of whoredom. Let us, however, put you in a box and lock you in it. Then he did so. When they arrived at the gate of Egypt, the customs officers said to him: What are you carrying in the box? He said to them: beans. They said to him: No, it is pepper. Give us the duty for pepper. He said to them: I shall hand it over. They said to him: It is not that. Rather this box is full of gold coins. He said to them: I shall hand you over the duty for gold coins. When they saw that he was accepting whatever they would say about it, they said: Unless he had something of value in his possession we could not

> be raising the price for him. At that moment they said to him: You are not moving from here until you open the box. Then he said to them: It is up to me to give you whatever you want, but you are not to open the box. Nevertheless, they insisted on opening the box against his will and saw Sarah. When they saw her they said: in case of one like this, it is not seemly to touch her. Immediately they took her and brought her unto Pharaoh (*Tanh*., *Lekh-Lekha*, 3; *Gen. R*., *Parashah* 40.5).

The main difference between the midrashic and biblical versions stands out: the biblical narrator gives an unflattering description of how Abraham tries to hide behind his wife's body to protect himself, whereas the Midrash describes how he tries to hide her, to protect her. Sarai's voice is not heard in the story, she does not react to her husband's proposal, and even in Pharaoh's house she keeps silent.[6]

Abraham's proposal-demand causes the reader great consternation. Thus, for example, contemporary scholars Gunn and Nolan Fewell voice their puzzlement:

> Abram, with mastery of understatement, is requesting that Sarai avail herself sexually to the male population of Egypt 'that it may go well with me because of you and that my life may be spared on your account'…

And indeed, the outcome of the act benefited Abraham for he was in fact selling Sarai to Pharaoh for a handsome profit: 'And it went well with Abram on her count, and he had sheep and cattle and donkeys and male and female slaves and she-asses and camels' (Gen. 12.16), and when he left Egypt he was 'very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold' (Gen. 13.2). Gunn and Nolan Fewell direct attention to another significant gap in the story: in the relationship between Abram and Sarai as it has been described so far, there is no reciprocity. Abram does not tell his wife about his mission, as if she is not included in the divine plan, just as he does not seek her opinion about his rescue plan in Egypt. Is it possible, the authors ask, that her barrenness which was heavily emphasized at the beginning of the story, removes her—from Abram's viewpoint—from the divine plan, and turns her into a dismissible object?[7] Other somewhat strange attempts to explain Abram's behavior in a seemingly 'Bedouin' code of conduct which permits a Bedouin woman to commit adultery in

6. Pace Jeansonne (*The Women of Genesis*, p. 17) dismisses the assumption that Sarai was a genuine partner in Abraham's plot. In her opinion, Sarai is presented as powerless in this story. The narrator does not tell us anything of her reaction or feelings. She is nothing but a paralyzed, voiceless object.

7. David M. Gunn and Donna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 92.

order to save her husband,[8] do not chime with familiar evidence on the behavioral norms of Bedouin culture in marital relations, which are founded on the strict upholding of family honor.

Sarah's Beauty

Sarai's beauty is mentioned in the narrative for the first time at the fateful moment prior to the entry into Egypt. In the course of the events preceding their journey to Egypt—her marriage to Abram, the divine revelation in Mesopotamia, their wanderings from Haran to Canaan—the narrator does not describe Sarai. Only now, with their entry into the menacing foreign world of Egypt, does Abram 'see' her.[9]

The rousing force of Sarai's beauty is emphasized by a recurrence conveyed by three supplementary perspectives: on the first occasion the description is provided by Abram: 'Look, I know you are a beautiful woman' (Gen. 12.11); it recurs in the Egyptians' view: 'The Egyptians saw the woman was very beautiful' (12.14); and again in the view of the courtiers: 'And Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh' (12.15). The change of subject—'the Egyptians' in general, and then 'Pharaoh's courtiers'—motivated the Jewish sages to describe Sarai's long and troubled way from the border post to the customs house, and eventually into Pharaoh's harem (*Tanh.*, Lekh-Lekha, 3; *Gen. R.*, *Parasha* 40.5).

The heightened references to Sarai's beauty run counter to the rules of biblical narrative economy, and they stand out when compared with other places in the Bible where the narrator describes other biblical figures. Out of their sensitivity to the fine changes made by the biblical narrator, the sages created a sort of criterion for gauging levels of beauty in the Bible. According to this scale Sarai was even more beautiful than Eve, who from time immemorial had been determined as possessing the highest level of feminine beauty:

8. K. Koch, 'The Ancestress of Israel in Danger', in *The Growth of Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1969), pp. 111-32 (127).

9. The Midrashic sages took the hint and relate that for reasons of modesty Abram did not look upon his wife until this moment. Only now, with the entry into Egypt, as they stand on a riverbank, Abram sees Sarai's reflection in the water, and she shines like the sun (*Tanh.*, Lekh-Lekha, 5; *Yashar*, Lekh-Lekha, 31a; *Zohar* 1.81b; cf. *B. Bat.* 16a; *Targum Yerushalmi*, Gen. 12.11).

> When he had opened the box, the whole land of Egypt sparkled from the luster of Sarai. R. Azaria and R. Jonathan in the name of R. Isaac: 'The model of the beauty of Eve was handed over to the most beautiful women of the generations to come'. Further on it is written, 'And the damsel was very fair' (1 Kings 1.4), that is, she was as fair as the beauty in the model of Eve (on Avishag). But here: 'The Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful' (Gen. 12.14), meaning, still more beautiful than Eve (*Gen. R.*, *Parasha* 40.5).

The amazing power of rare beauty whose effect on onlookers clearly emerges from the narrative, is obviously connected with the woman's sexuality. A feminist interpretive approach will immediately identify the recurrence of the verb 'to see' in the context of Sarai. The masculine 'possessive look' recurs three times, and through it Sarai is portrayed mainly as a 'body', a sex object. Abram 'sees' her, followed by the Egyptians and the courtiers, and then the readers. Sarai is therefore presented in the narrative as an irresistible focus of erotic attraction.

The only direct conversation with Sarai occurs in the second story, in Gen. 20.16. Abimelech King of Gerar addresses her, offering her monetary compensation, and also what appears to be a means of preventing a recurrence of any such situation in the future. He says to Sarai: 'Look, I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your brother. Let it hereby serve you as a shield against censorious eyes for everyone who is with you, and you are now publicly vindicated.' Numerous commentators have encountered difficulty in the literal interpretation of this verse (*ksut eynayim*), and we shall not deal with them all here, but shall focus only on Abimelech's offer to provide Sarai with 'a shield against censorious eyes'. I found a fascinating discussion of this in Haim Gilad's article.[10] Gilad contends that as opposed to other women in the ancient East, Hebrew women did not cover their faces, that is, their beauty was visible. We can learn something of this from several stories: Sarai's beauty was revealed to Abraham, the Egyptians, and the courtiers; Abimelech takes her into his harem because of her beauty; and from the story of Rebekah and the slave and that of the encounter between Jacob and Rachel we learn that the faces of the young girls, Rebekah and Rachel, were uncovered, and thus their beauty impressed the men they met by the well. Married women throughout the countries of the East covered their faces, Gilad contends, a custom preserved in traditional Arab society to this day. The covering served as a sort of 'identity card' for the married

10. Haim Gilad, '*Hinei hu lach ksut einayim*' ('Let it hereby serve you as a shield against censorious eyes' [Gen. 20:16]), *Beit Mikra* 22 (1976), pp. 43-45.

woman, who is consequently forbidden to other men. Abimelech therefore gives a thousand pieces of silver as compensation to her 'brother', and the 'shield against censorious eyes' to Sarai and her handmaidens so she should not entrap innocent men who might perceive her as free. Whether or not this interpretation is sufficiently well grounded historically and anthropologically, it seems to me that despite the difficulty in deciphering the verse, the 'shield against censorious eyes' offered to Sarai by Abimelech was intended to obscure her beauty, to cover and hide it from men's eyes so it would not be seductive. Highlighting the element of beauty in the Hebrew characters that enter into a relationship with the other, foreign side, recurs in other stories, and as we shall see in the continuation of this discussion, its role in the narrative plot will bear special significance.

Status of the Research

In modern research the affair is often identified with the theme, 'The Ancestress of Israel in Danger'.[11] The triple story (Gen. 12; 20; 26) has gained great interest and yielded a long line of studies, not all of which will be referred to here, and a multiplicity of interpretations has even created the need to classify them by groups. According to Ilona Rashkow's proposal, the studies are divided into several types: (a) studies dealing with the narratives as documentary stories relating the history of Abraham's family; (b) anthropological studies that focus on information that can be retrieved from the stories of the ancient tribal culture; (c) studies in the comparative literature that engage with the motif of the kidnapping of a beautiful woman (e.g. Helen of Troy); and (d) theological studies that assume a spiritual development in the transition from Genesis 12 to Genesis 20, which in their view is a story of a higher ethical level.[12]

The majority of researchers from the 'Biblical Criticism' school concur that the narratives are a variation on a common theme. They contend that the narrative is a single story passed down orally and fashioned

11. Some of the better-known studies of the triple story include Koch, 'The Ancestress of Israel in Danger'; Robert Polzin, 'The Ancestress of Israel in Danger', *Semeia* 3 (1975), pp. 81-97; David Petersen, 'A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif', *BibRes* 18 (1973), pp. 30-43; George Coats, 'A Threat to the Host', in George Coats (ed.), *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (JSOTSup, 35; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 70-98.

12. Ilona N. Rashkow, 'Intertextuality, Transference, and The Reader in/of Genesis 12 and 20', in Fewell (ed.), *Reading between Texts*, pp. 58-59.

differently in different places.[13] These researchers do not usually address the triple recurrence as an intertextual structure, but view the recurrence (which according to them is unnecessary) as an editorial error which, due to a certain negligence, introduced several versions of the same narrative into the canon, which was passed down orally. In their opinion the different variations originated in different sources. The majority completely ignore the ethical problems arising from the narratives—the Patriarch Abraham who hands over his wife to another man's harem to save his own skin—and focus on what Cheryl Exum rightly defines as a series of secondary questions:[14] Which is the oldest version of the three? How did the tradition develop? When was each version created? Was a man entitled, in accordance with the customs of the time, to marry his half-sister?[15]

I found special interest in studies that do not ignore the triple repetition. Some of them attempt to define the thematic-ideological axis that binds the three stories together in the local context of the stories of Abraham. Robert Polzin,[16] for instance, addresses the continuum, the order in which the stories appear one after the other, and seeks to unite them on the axis of the divine promise of greatness, wealth, and fertility: 'And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your

13. T.D Alexander, 'Are the Wife/Sister Incidents of Genesis Literary Compositional Variants?', *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 145-53; Mark. E. Biddle, 'The Endangered Ancestress and Blessing for the Nations', *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 599-611; Susan Niditch, 'The Three Wife–Sister Tales of Genesis', in *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 23-69.

14. J. Cheryl Exum, 'Who's Afraid of The Endangered Ancestress?', in *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup, 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 148–69 (152).

15. The law according to Leviticus expressly forbids marriage within the nuclear family. Lev. 18.9 states: 'The nakedness of thy sister, the daughter of thy father, or daughter of thy mother, whether she be born at home, or born abroad, even their nakedness thou shalt not uncover'. Ephraim Speiser finds that according to the laws of the Huri society the woman had greater rights if the marriage was defined as a 'sister marriage'. A man could marry a woman and at the same time adopt her as a 'sister'. Such a marriage accorded her higher status. In my opinion, even if this arrangement were extended beyond the Huri society and existed in our case, Abraham's handing over of his wife-sister to another man and abandoning her to an adulterous relationship, while providing a defense for his own lie, at the same time exacerbating the ethical problem, for even if he had not lied, he was still handing over a wife with high status for sexual relations with another man. E.A. Speiser, 'The Wife–Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives', in A. Altman (ed.) *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 15-28.

16. Polzin, 'The Ancestress of Israel in Danger', pp. 30-43.

name great, and you shall be a blessing' (Gen. 12.2); in Polzin's opinion this blessing is delayed and remains unfulfilled so long as the Patriarchs pursue the path of deceit. Although the blessing of wealth is swiftly fulfilled, that of a son is delayed. The sin of adultery leads to barrenness (in Abimelech's house too). God's blessing is perceived as a process that will only be completed when its preconditions are met. In Polzin's view the cumulative lessons show that God's blessing is dependent on appropriate ethical behavior, for if this is not observed God delays fulfillment of His promise. It is worthy of note that this proposal is not particularly convincing. The recurring story does not prove that Abraham learns from experience and changes his behavior, for on the second occasion he repeats the same lie. Moreover, in his apology to Abimelech he confesses that he used this ploy in earlier cases too: 'And it happened that when the gods made me a wanderer from my father's house, that I told her, "This is the kindness you can do for me: in every place to which we come, say of me, he is my brother"' (Gen. 20.13). Furthermore, this problematic behavioral pattern is passed down to the next generation, to Isaac 'like father, like son', namely, the manipulative lie becomes a behavioral model handed down from one generation to the next. Like Polzin, George W. Coats[17] tries to unite the stories on a continuous axis of another blessing from the initial mission: 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'.[18] Similar to that of Polzin, this observation addresses the recurring story as one episode in an ongoing biographical or historiographical episode whose role is to signify the gradual process whereby the image of the Patriarchs is realized. This reference, which views the stories as educational stations in the Patriarchs' biography (a tradition begun by the Jewish sages who interpreted the various episodes in Abraham's life as ten tests), can also be found in David Petersens's 1973 article.[19] He says that he too tries to find 'the inner truth' of the triple story. His main contention is that Abraham lost control of his plan. Accumulation of wealth is an inseparable part of the sojourn in Egypt, but Egypt is also the root of the problem, for Abraham lost his wife there (the analogy of the Egyptian episode and the story of the people of Israel going down into Egypt, and the parallel with the plagues brought down by God on Pharaoh is, in his view, very

17. Coats, 'A Threat to the Host'.

18. See David Clines's ironic critique of this proposal. Clines proves that Abraham brings a curse, not a blessing, into every territory he enters. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help?*, pp. 30-43.

19. Petersen, 'A Thrice-Told Tale'.

clear).[20] The detailed inventory of the property only emphasizes the void opened by Abraham handing over Sarai. The initiative of correctly implementing the divine plan is therefore transferred from the Patriarch to God, who brings down plagues on the king, thus saving the couple from his grasp. In Petersen's opinion, the subject binding the three stories together could be the gap separating the divine and the human plans.[21]

The thematic-ideational treatment that addresses the three stories as stations in the Patriarch's educational process does not, in my opinion, translate into action the entire intertextual potential, and is therefore inadequate.

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing number of studies employing literary research methods and modern literary terminology—mainly from the fields of psychology and gender studies—on the biblical texts. Following Barthes, it may be stated that the originality of a cultural system depends on the number of possible readings formed around the same central image, which is the object of the reading.[22] Reading variations are not entirely anarchistic. In Barthes' view they are dependent on various types of knowledge imprinted on the creation of the image—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic, or any other classifiable and definable knowledge. The rich image can therefore be realized in several spheres of meaning. Each signifier in the overall picture of the image can evoke a different pool as a reference basis in different readers. In other words, one lexical block (a 'lexia') can activate different 'lexicons' in readers. The multiplicity and range of readings derive, inter alia, from the fact that not all the referential pools are evoked in one person; readers possess multiple, perhaps many, 'lexicons'. In the present context a

20. The connection between Gen. 12 and the exodus from Egypt was made by the Jewish sages. Yair Zakovitch, who also links the episode of Abraham going down into Egypt during the famine, and the people of Israel going down into Egypt, sees the people's suffering as a belated punishment for Abraham's lie. He goes even further by claiming that Pharaoh's decree that was imposed solely on the males, 'Every son that is born you shall cast into the river', is also a punishment for Abraham trying to save his own skin. See Yair Zakovitch, 'Disgrace: The Lies of the Patriarch', *SocRes* 75 (2008), pp. 1035-58 (1038). The notion that Abraham was in fact the prototype of the first exile, and that his story is an omen of things to come, also appears in Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 375-76.

21. Petersen addresses the moral which in his view emerges from each episode: the wealth is obtained ambivalently; in the second story Abraham incorrectly gauged the other's fear of God, and the third focuses on the Patriarch's problematic success in a foreign land. The last definition will be addressed later in the discussion in an extensive development of the interpretative process I shall present.

22. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, pp. 46-47.

lexicon is therefore only part of a possible symbolic alignment. This fact creates an assortment of readings, each one of which is based on different lexicons (personal, anthropological, gender, religious, and so forth).

Exum also posits that the triple story in Genesis works on us on several levels since, like dreams, literary works are multipurpose. When Freud compares stories with dreams he notes that both stories and dreams demand an interpretation that is open to numerous directions of thought. Following Freud, Exum says that all the original writers are motivated by more than one urge or drive, and are therefore open to more than one interpretation. She, for instance, used a Freudian analytical lexicon for fresh thinking about the ancient text of 'You are my sister' stories. Her interpretation focuses on mapping the unconscious layers of the text in order to reveal a collective androcentric subconscious whose positions in her opinion are represented by Abraham.[23] In her view, the recurrence mechanism mandates the reader's active participation in creating the meaning. This participation extracts the fears of the implicit author as an agent of a repressive male worldview. Esther Fuchs, whose point of departure is also gender-oriented, deals with the three stories as part of a much broader whole that she calls 'the adultery type scene' (she creates an intertextual relationship between these stories and the story of Uriah the Hittite, King David and Bathsheba).[24]

The following discussion will present to the reader as broad an intertextual dialogue as possible in order to extract most of the possibilities it contains. The triple story (Gen. 12; 20; and 26) invites comparative intertextual observation on both the macro level (complete narrative episodes) and the micro level (words and expressions). The recurring pattern in the three stories enables their definition in accordance with

23. Exum, 'Who's Afraid of the Endangered Ancestress'. The point of departure of Exum's intertextual interpretation is ideological-feminist and based on a Freudian psychoanalytical lexicon. According to her approach the three stories in Genesis conceal forbidden sexual fantasies. The male narrator is simultaneously afraid of and attracted by the fantasy of a married woman having sexual relations with another man. The obsessiveness fulfilled in the present text, which is caused by three repetitions of the same story, and based on the compulsive repetition that Freud attributes to repression, characterizes the need of the 'self' to process the fantasy until a situation of control is attained. The differences between the different versions provide an opportunity for gradual work on resolving the conflict. The fear gradually evaporates and the third version offers a 'narrative correction'. In the three versions the foreign king serves as a superego that imposes limits on the id.

24. Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 118-39.

Robert Alter's terminology[25] as 'type scenes', namely, as manipulation of a permanent system of pre-derived motifs; from other standpoints the three recurring stories will also function as a basis for what Yair Zakovitch calls 'reflection stories',[26] which, following the Jewish sages, bind the story of Abraham and Sarai to the events of the bondage in Egypt.[27]

At this point, the first station on our journey, I wish to draw attention to several methodological practices which, in my opinion, should be adopted in intertextual reading:

(a) The written version of the text as we see it in the canonical version mandates a serious approach by the reader to the narrator's/editor's informed choices.

(b) The reader must try and produce enriching meanings from the triple repetition by means of synchronic poetic observation, and also through diachronic observation; comparing the stories and the reading in the order of their appearance in the Bible as a matter bearing meaning.

(c) The repetition mandates the reader's active participation in creating the meaning.[28] In my opinion this participation will be of assistance in extracting the fears of the implicit author as an agent of a collective worldview. Placing the repetitions of the story in the Bible on a time continuum, as will be demonstrated later, will prove that parts of the meta-text together comprise a story that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Let us now add to our study the two additional stories:

25. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 47-63.

26. Zakovitch, *Through the Looking Glass*.

27. In their book on Abram and Sarai in Egypt, Zakovitch and Shinan define the episode in Gen. 12 as the earliest expression of the literary type, and the other two chapters as interpretations of and commentaries on the ancient story. In their opinion, prominent in chs. 20 and 26 is the desire to enhance the Patriarch's image, and the two later versions clear him of any element that might lay suspicion of lying on him. In their view, too, the image of God becomes more refined. See Yair Zakovitch and Avigdor Shinan, *Avram ve-sarai be-mizrayim* (Abram and Sarai in Egypt) (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1982).

28. The reader's transference is demonstrated in Ilona Rashkow's article, 'Intertextuality, Transference'.

Genesis 20

1 And Abraham journeyed onward from there to the Negeb region and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar.
2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister'. And Abi-
melech the king of Gerar sent and
3 took Sarah.
And God came to Abimelech in a night-dream and said to him, 'You are a dead man because of the
4 woman you took, as she is another's wife'.
But Abimelech had not come near
5 her, and he said, 'My Lord, will you slay a nation even if innocent?
Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister'? and she, she, too, said, 'He is
6 my brother'. With a pure heart and with clean hands I have done this'.
And God said to him in the dream, 'Indeed, I know that with a pure heart you have done this, and I on My part have kept you from offend-
7 ing against Me, and so I have not allowed you to touch her.
Now, send back the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will intercede for you, and you may live. And if you do not send her back, know
8 that you are doomed to die, you and all that belongs to you.'
And Abimelech rose early in the morning and called to all his servants, and he spoke these things
9 in their hearing, and the men were terribly afraid.
And Abimelech called to Abraham and said to him, 'What have you done to us, and how have I offended you, that you should bring upon me and my kingdom so great an
10 offense? Things that should not be done you have done to me.'
And Abimelech said to Abraham,

Genesis 26

6 And Isaac dwelled in Gerar.
7 And the men of the place asked of his wife and he said, 'She is my sister', fearing to say, 'My wife'—'lest the men of the place kill me over Rebekah, for she is comely to look at'.
8 And it happened, as his time there drew on, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of the window and saw—and there was Isaac playing with Rebekah his
9 wife.
And Abimelech summoned Isaac and he said, 'Why, look, she is your wife, and how could you say, 'She is my sister?' And Isaac said to him,
10 'For I thought, lest I die over her'.
And Abimelech said, 'What is this that you have done? One of the people might well have lain with your wife and you would have
11 brought guilt upon us.
And Abimelech commanded all the people saying, 'Whosoever touches this man or his wife is doomed to die'.

11 'What did you imagine when you did this thing?'
And Abraham said, 'For I thought,
12 there is surely no fear of God and they will kill me because of my wife. And, in point of fact, she is my sister, my father's daughter, though
13 not my mother's daughter, and she became my wife. And it happened, when the gods made me a wanderer from my father's house, that I told her, "This is the kindness you can do for me: in every place to which
14 we come, say of me, he is my brother"'.
And Abimelech took sheep and cattle and male and female slaves
15 and gave them to Abraham, and he sent him back to him Sarah his wife.
16 And Abimelech said, 'Look, my land is before you. Settle wherever you want'. And to Sarah he said, 'Look, I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your brother. Let it hereby serve you as a shield
17 against censorious eyes for everyone who is with you, and you are now publicly vindicated.'
And Abraham interceded with
18 God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave-women and they gave birth.
For the Lord had shut fast every womb in the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Intertextual Study

It seems to me that intertextual study of the three stories on the lexical level (words, expressions), the typological level (repetition of the narrative pattern), and the reflective level in which each story reflects the previous story or stories, can enrich the discussion and from it produce meta-textual meanings. Together with the emphasized identification of the recurring pattern, readers are invited to discover the gradual development. The typological character of the antecedent story

is underscored by the equal elements; the gradualness will emerge from the various elements that will arise from the stories' mutual reflectivity and their comparison.[29] Furthermore, the ideological concept at the basis of the stories links them to additional stories in the Bible (particularly those of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and the book of Esther), which are also grounded in the same basic pattern, and it can be proved that the later narrator of the book of Esther is aware of both the antecedent pattern of the Patriarchs' stories and that of the story of Joseph (see chs. 3 and 4).

Constructing the Pattern

Let us begin by describing the analogical elements: in all three stories the Patriarchs are on foreign soil—Egypt, Gerar, and Philistia—and are seemingly subject to the arbitrariness of a society whose moral dictates and attitude toward strangers are unclear to the stories' protagonists. In the first and third stories there is existential hardship: the Patriarchs wander to the foreign territory because of famine; in all three stories the Hebrew man tells his foreign interlocutors that his wife is his sister. The expression 'say you are my sister' or 'she is my sister' recurs in all three. In the first and third stories this lie is justified by protection of life. The man's implied assumption is that due to her rare beauty, the woman is unwittingly liable to rouse the locals to kill him for his wife. In the first two stories, of Abraham and Sarah, the woman is taken into the ruler's harem, and only divine intervention rescues her. In all three stories the foreign king reproves the husband for his deceit, and expresses his anger on the deceit that has brought down (in the first case of both Pharaoh and Abimelech) or is likely to bring down (in the third episode) a major catastrophe on him and his house. Both Pharaoh and Abimelech bitterly criticize the husband's actions. In the second story, which from an ethical standpoint is the more developed version, God himself is revealed to the foreign king, approves of his good intentions, and instructs him on how to end the affair, whereas in all three episodes God is not revealed to nor speaks with either Abraham or Isaac.

29. See Meir Sternberg, 'The Structure of Repetition: Strategies of Informational Redundancy', in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 365-440.

The Recurring Pattern

	Genesis 12 (vv. 10-20)	*Genesis 20*	*Genesis 26 (vv. 6-11)*
Locality	Egypt	Gerar	Gerar
Situation	Grave famine		Famine
The woman's beauty	'Look, I know you are a beautiful woman' (v. 11); 'The Egyptians saw the woman was very beautiful' (v. 14); 'And Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh' (v. 15).		'For she is comely to look at' (v. 6).
The husband's proposal	'Say, please, that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me on your count'.	'And Abraham said of his wife Sarah, 'She is my sister''.	'And the men of the place asked of his wife and he said, "She is my sister", fearing to say, "My wife"—lest the men of the place kill me over Rebekah'.
What happens to the woman	'And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house'.	'And Abimelech the king of Gerar sent and took Sarah' (v. 2); 'But Abimelech had not come near her' (v. 4).	
Divine intervention	'And the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with terrible plagues because of Sarai the wife of Abram'.	'For the Lord had shut fast every womb in the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife'.	
The foreign king's reaction	'What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, "She is my sister", so that I took her to me as wife? Now, here is your wife. Take her and get out!'	'What have you done to us, and how have I offended you, that you should bring upon me and my kingdom so great an offense? Things that should not be done you have done to me'.	'Why, look, she is your wife, and how could you say. "She is my sister?"… "What is this you have done? One of the people might well have lain with your wife and you would have brought guilt upon us"'.

What does the husband gain?	'And it went well with Abram on her count, and he had sheep and cattle and donkeys and male and female slaves and she-asses and camels' (v. 16)	'And Abimelech took sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he sent back to him Sarah his wife'.	

Repetition as Judgment

Each recurring narrative situation arouses the reader to identify behavioral patterns in the plot's character or characters. Comparison between the protagonist's behavior then and now also activates mechanisms of judgment and evaluation. Did the protagonist behave differently when he reentered a similar situation, or did he perhaps continue to behave in accordance with the recurring obsessive behavioral pattern when he was given another chance? Additional questions are linked to the changes in the situation itself in all three stories. Meticulous study shows that two gradual moves can be revealed: the danger to which the woman is exposed diminishes gradually from story to story, whereas the tone of reproof directed toward the husband becomes more severe.

In the first story the woman is taken into Pharaoh's harem, and although it is not expressly stated, the language of the text hints that the forbidden relations between the foreign king and the other man's wife are indeed consummated: 'And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house… And the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with terrible plagues because of Sarai the wife of Abram' (vv. 15, 17). The phrase 'was taken' (*vatukakh*) might allude to the ancient Hebrew '*likukhin*', meaning marital sexual relations. It would seem that the heavy punishments inflicted on Pharaoh and his household immediately after the 'taking' reinforce readers' fears about what happened to Sarai in the king's harem. Indeed, Pharaoh admits to Abram: 'I took her to me as wife'. In his commentary on this verse, Ibn Ezra emphasizes that 'She was taken to be his wife to lie with her' (even if he interprets, following the Midrash, that 'the great plagues' impaired Pharaoh's sexual potency 'and he could not touch her').

In the second story the narrator takes pains to stress twice that 'Abimelech had not come near her' and that 'the Lord had shut fast every womb in the house of Abimelech', which if, according to the narrator, Abimelech had not come near her, was an unnecessary form

of 'contraception'.[30] In both cases the narrator adds the appellation 'Abraham's wife' or 'his wife' to the forename 'Sarah', in order to emphasize the sin of adultery.

In the third story the woman is not taken into the foreign king's harem and the threat to her is not fulfilled. The danger awaiting the woman in the harem is replaced by a passive erotic scene in which the foreign king secretly observes the husband and wife as they have marital relations: 'Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of the window and saw—and there was Isaac playing with Rebekah his wife' (26.8). The roles have changed—the woman does not have forbidden relations (either real or potential) with the foreign king, but solely with her husband.

Another topic worthy of attention is connected with the moral significance of the 'marriage price' paid to the Patriarch after his wife is taken into the harem. In the first story it says, 'And it went well with Abram on her count, and he had sheep and cattle and donkeys and male and female slaves and she-asses and camels' (12.16). Readers cannot avoid the recurring echo of this verse from Abram's earlier words: 'so that it will go well with me on your count' (12.13). The feeble attempts of commentators to interpret this statement as if Abram did not really intend to get anything but only to save his own life (e.g. Rabbi David Kimchi [Radak] 1160–1235), fail the test of attentive reading of the text. The recurring expression presents Abram as a sort of procurer, and the marriage price as his payment.

In the second version (Gen. 20) the narrator breaks the connection between the handing over of the wife to the king, and the man's consequent material profit, by changing the order of the plot: the gifts are bestowed on Abraham only after the act, not as a marriage price but as compensation. And should readers ask why Abimelech bothers to compensate Abraham after the latter had both deceived him and brought down the curse of barrenness on his house, the question can be answered by saying that the 'payment' is but one of the cautious steps taken by

30. The reader should take note that in the following chapter, after years of prolonged barrenness, Isaac is born, and it is possible that the double emphasis is to obviate any thoughts the reader might have regarding the circumstances of his birth and Abraham's paternity. Following Peter Miscall, David Clines calculates the time difference between the appearance of the angels heralding Isaac's birth and Sarah's entry into Abimelech's harem, and concludes that she was already pregnant when she entered the harem, a fact that makes our judgment of Abraham's behavior even more severe: see Peter D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help?*, p. 75

Abimelech after God gave him a warning in his dream: 'Now, send back the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will intercede for you, and you may live. And if you do not send her back, know that you are doomed to die, you and all that belongs to you' (20.7). In the third version in which the woman is not taken into the harem, this link is quite naturally missing.

The diminishing level of danger is also expressed in the gradual diminishment of the punishments meted out to the king and his house. In the first story 'the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with terrible plagues'; in the second we hear that 'the Lord had shut fast every womb in the house of Abimelech'; and in the third, following the changes in the plot, no sanctions are imposed on the foreign king.

A gradual increase of reproach is found in both the overt and covert reproof directed by the narrator toward the husband's moral and human behavior.

Ilona Rashkow, for example, directs our attention to the fact that Abraham expresses great concern for his life, but is not at all interested in the dangers facing Sarai, both as 'his sister' who presents herself in the foreign land under a false identity, and also when she is taken into Pharaoh's harem:

> Since discourse often reflects hidden desires, perhaps Abraham's real motive is a hope to receive gifts from the Egyptians, and his words 'that it go well with me because of you' are a euphemistic way of saying that by abandoning his wife to the lust of a foreign potentate, he might derive material advantage. Certainly Abraham shows no regard for Sarah's welfare, as his language demonstrates… Perhaps Abraham sees Sarah as expendable because she has no child, and wants to be rid of her as a wife.[31]

And when in the next verse the sentence 'And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold' appears, readers know that Abram has become wealthy importuning for his wife. Sarai herself neither speaks nor acts. Rashkow emphasizes that the expressions of the other characters negate her individual uniqueness. None of them call her by her name, 'Sarai' or 'Sarah', but use personal and possessive pronouns: 'she', 'your wife', 'her', and even 'a man's wife'. In all three stories she is nothing more than a silent object, a doll, that can be effortlessly used in accordance with her husband's wishes.

In the first episode there is still some cooperation by the husband who tells his wife directly about his rescue plan, even though he does not seek her agreement. On the second occasion there is a succinct but

31. Rashkow, 'Intertextuality, Transference', p. 65.

unreasoned quotation: 'And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister"' (Gen. 20.2). It is difficult to understand from the verse's language if this is directed at Sarah or the locals. This succinct (and possibly distorted) sentence moved the Jewish sages to identify a commanding tone in Abraham's speech, and conclude that on this occasion after she had already undergone the Egyptian experience, Sarah acceded to the proposal 'against her will and consent' (*Gen. R.*, *Parasha* 52.4). Her sexual exploitation in the second instance is far more shocking, since on this occasion the narrator does not pin the reason for the wandering on existential distress, namely, famine. Examination of the declaration 'you are my sister' therefore synchronically and diachronically underscores the increasing alienation toward the woman.[32]

Together with the measures serving as means of covert criticism, the narrator also employs a means that can be interpreted as overt criticism. When the truth is revealed to the foreign king, he castigates the husband and as such serves as an ethical agent on the narrator's behalf. A gradual increase of reproach can also be identified in the kings' words of reproof.

Pharaoh says, 'What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, "She is my sister", so that I took her to me as wife? Now, here is your wife. Take her and get out!' (Gen. 12.18-19). The complaint directed at the husband is mainly about deceit. Pharaoh's intentions are presented as honorable: after all, he took Sarai as his wife. The reproof is mainly felt in the last verses, and attest to impatience and perhaps even revulsion: 'Now, here is your wife. Take her and get out!'

On the other hand, 'the first' Abimelech defines Abraham's act as an offence that might cause a sin: 'What have you done to us, and how have I offended you, that you should bring upon me and my kingdom so great an offense? Things that should not be done you have done to me' (Gen. 20.9). Not only that, the sin is not just a matter between the lying husband and the king. The act was liable to defame an entire population because of 'things that should not be done'. In this case, too, the biblical narrator highlights the sin of adultery with the terms 'a man's wife' and 'another man's wife' (*beulat ba'al*) when referring to Sarah.[33]

32. Following Miscall, Clines concludes that Sarah was already pregnant when she was taken into Abimelech's harem, and that Abraham put her at great risk should the fact of her pregnancy by another man emerge in the harem (Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative*, p. 32; Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help?*, p. 75).

33. In this context the Hebrew word *beula* carries the meaning both of 'property' and the blunt sexual meaning of a woman who has had sexual relations and is not a virgin.

'The second' Abimelech says, 'What is this you have done? One of the people might well have lain with your wife and you would have brought guilt upon us' (Gen. 26.10). There can be no doubt that this reproof is couched in the harshest terms, due mainly to the sexual overtones of the blunt, undisguised language. On this occasion the king uses only the collective 'us', and the plural form clarifies the ethical norms prevailing in the foreign people's culture, norms that were endangered by Abraham's manipulative plan. The gradual increase of reproach in the legal difference between 'sin' and 'guilt' is worthy of note. 'Sin' is first stage by which a person commits a transgression. The word 'guilt' embodies the verdict handed down after the trial.[34]

Moreover, the third story alludes to sexual activity that goes beyond the norms of modesty on Isaac's part. 'And it happened, as his time there drew on, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of the window and saw—and there was Isaac playing with Rebekah his wife' (Gen. 26.8), namely, making love with his wife. The Jewish sages severely criticize Isaac's behavior. In the view of the sages Isaac is the one who has unbridled sexual relations in full daylight, and not in accordance with the restriction of the sex act to the night-time hours:

> And it came to pass, when he had been there a long time… Did not R. Yohanan say, 'He who has sexual relations by day, lo, this is an inappropriate practice'. For R. Yohanan said: 'Sexual relations should be carried on only by night' (*Gen. R.*, *Parasha* 64.5).

In summary, it therefore seems that one of the implicit narrator's roles in the triple story is to encourage readers to criticize the Patriarch's behavior and note that even when the stories' protagonists are given a second chance, they do not change their obsessive behavior.

34. There are two classes of sacrifice in Judaism that are specified in Leviticus: *Kodshei kodashim* (of a major degree of sanctity) and *Kodashim kalim* (of a minor grade). The sacrifices of 'sin' and 'guilt' both belong to the former, and are slaughtered to the north of the altar. The latter are sacrificed for transgressions of the 'thou shalt not' commandments, concealing another's sin, contact with unclean things, and theft. The 'guilt' sacrifice is one of purification from sacrilege, robbery, and theft, or sexual relations with a maidservant (Lev. 19.22). The value of the guilt sacrifice is the greater: a ram worth thirty shekels; the value of the sin sacrifice distinguished between rich and poor. The rich man sacrifices a sheep or goat, and the poor man makes do with flour. See M. Solieli and M. Barcuz (eds.), *Biblical Lexicon* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1964 [Hebrew]). In my opinion, classification of sins and the differences in the monetary value of the sacrifices attests to a hierarchy between 'sin' and 'guilt', despite them both being *Kodshei kodashim*.

Against whom or what is the criticism leveled? Can it be extended beyond the biographical story of Abraham and Isaac and their relationship with their wives? The stories are not about ordinary people, but the Patriarchs, whose conduct and behavior serve as a model for study and admiration by their descendants and believers. What is the 'inner story' or the 'meta-text' of the triple story? The discussion in the next chapter will revolve around this.

2

The Recurring Story as a Collective Cultural Discourse

The interpretation I offer below is based on a structuralist approach and a national-social-political lexicon. As I shall demonstrate, the 'You are my sister' stories constituted a basis for a bigger meta-narrative. They formed a special code expressing the collective fears of the cultural group in which the stories were created, and have enduring manifestations in the literary tradition stretching from the Bible to the Modern Era.

According to my conception, following the socio-critical interpretation of Lucien Goldmann (1966),[1] the literary text—every literary text—is not only a product of an individual writer driven by inspiration, as he is perceived by romantic thinking (in the form of the divine muse whispering into the writer's ear), but mainly an expression of the society to which he belongs. Every person possesses a level of consciousness that goes beyond the individual, a trans-individual consciousness that he/she invests in the creation of a unique semiotic world whose intent is to convey, by means of signs and symbols, the entire gamut of hopes, expectations, anxieties, or vital problems of his/her cultural group. The collective subject to which we belong (and we usually belong to more than one) offers us values, a worldview, customs and symbols by means of its characteristic semiotic expressions.[2]

Sociocriticism offers various concepts for defining the state of the collective subject's consciousness. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1973)[3] distinguishes between overt and deep structures that reside mainly in the unconscious. In Lévi-Strauss's theory (following Jung) this definition

1. L. Goldmann, 'Structuralisme gentique et creation litteraire', in *Science humaines et philosophie* (Paris: Gonthier, 1966), pp. 151-65.

2. See also E. Cros, *Theory and Practice of Sociocriticism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1988), pp. 14-16, 60.

3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (trans. Monique Layton; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

corresponds with the hypothesis on the existence of a 'collective unconscious' lying at the basis of literary works. Goldmann predicates three levels of consciousness. To the well-known Freudian terms, 'conscious' and 'subconscious', he adds the term 'non-conscious'. The non-conscious is trans-individual, and unlike the Freudian subconscious, it is not repressed and need not overcome any resistance in order to become conscious, but has only to be brought to light by scientific analysis.[4]

In this context Boyarin accords great importance to Hayden White's studies on historiography.[5] In Boyarin's opinion, White formulated with great clarity the role of the intertext in historiographical writing: the central plots, the recurring narratives that every unique culture relates to itself, are the most vital elements in the cultural intertext of every collective subject. Through them every culture preserves ideological patterns of meaning, but also changes them. Every historian who writes history as a story has of necessity shaped his discourse while employing plot structures that support the ideology of his culture.[6]

Following this hypothesis, the recurring pattern on which the discussion will focus—the story of the Hebrew man who enters or finds himself in foreign territory—should be addressed as a dominant element of the collective worldview of Hebrew and Jewish culture, and its meaning should be examined both in the texts in which it first appeared, and the derivative texts that reuse it. According to my premise, the recurring story and its components are based upon a trans-individual structure that crosses borders of time and place. It is not a personal story relating the history of a specific person, but the story of an entire people.

Evidently, this basic pattern does not disappear from the cultural-collective pool as long as the reality offers materials that may be shaped in accordance with this principle. The exiled Hebrew/Jew story has therefore kept its place in Jewish/Hebrew culture down the generations, drawing its vitality from the continuous experience of exile as a fundamental experience in the collective consciousness of the nation. Tracing the recurring story both in Genesis and the later biblical books, as well as its repeated appearances in modern Hebrew literature, will prove that most of the writers who entered a dialogue with the antecedent story on the time continuum were aware of the use they made of the antecedent structure.

4. See Cros, *Theory and Practice of Sociocriticism*, p. 10.
5. See Boyarin, *Midrash Tanayim*, pp. 41-42.
6. H. White, 'The Burden of History', in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 60.

The Patriarch on Foreign Soil

According to my reading, the characters on the story's stage represent general entities, and their stories should be read not only as a personal-biographical story of the Patriarchs, but also as a national-social dilemma whose meaning is far broader. In this regard I continue several of the fertile ideas I found in Joel Rosenberg's 1986 work on political allegory in the Hebrew Bible. According to Rosenberg, this trend is found in seemingly personal stories, such as the cycle of Abraham stories or the story of David: 'biblical allegory sees that self as both individual and collective'.[7] Allegorical reading of the biblical text, says Rosenberg, is an ancient tradition that had its beginnings with Philo. Through the generations the Bible's readership did not see itself as readers that were distant in time and place: 'To read biblical narrative…in ways that will do justice to its more enduring subtlety requires that we see ourselves as its contemporaries in a painful, demanding sense of the term: namely, that we remain rooted in our own world and understand the story to be addressing itself to us where we stand'.[8] Adopting the deconstructionist method, Rosenberg disassembles the stories into their components, redefines them according to abstract universal themes, and presents them on a binary axis as a conflict or tensions between two poles. From this position he identifies recurring themes in Abraham's stories. On the triple stories, he says:

> The 'wife–sister' motif, considered as an item of history and tradition, is an obscure and suggestive theme whose full meaning will probably continue to elude us. Its role in the cycle, however, is reasonably clear… it is one of several kinds of episodes illustrating Abraham's contact with foreigners, and one in which the question of foreignness, as such, is most at issue.[9]

The allegorical trend in the 'wife–sister' stories is given further support due to the story's recurrence on the time continuum. Mention of the first story in the later one defines it as a meta-linguistic signifier because it is a 'second language' in which one speaks about the first linguistic system, and therefore carries abstract or allegorical meaning.[10] The great

7. Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 21.

8. Rosenberg, *King and Kin*, p. 45.

9. Rosenberg, *King and Kin*, pp. 77-78. Later, Rosenberg contends that the tension the story creates is between endogamous and exogamous marriage. My interpretation, on the other hand, emphasizes the tension between foreignness and Hebrewness.

10. See R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (trans. A. Lavers; New York: Hill &Wang, 1978), p. 115.

meta-text will also include the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, the book of Esther, and other literary representations that appear in the Midrash and modern Hebrew literature. In the meantime we can formulate the 'inner story' of the triple story by the following question: How does the Patriarch behave on foreign soil? And the answer: The Patriarchs, as representative figures of ancient Hebrew culture, repeatedly return to their problematic, almost compulsive pattern of behavior. The sojourn in foreign territory brings them material wealth, but also exacts a heavy toll—Sarah.[11]

As I shall show in the following chapters, the meta-theme revealed at the first station becomes a behavioral paradigm representing the relationship between Hebrewness and foreignness in a foreign situation.[12] According to my interpretation, the central image in the three stories, the sexual relations between the Hebrew protagonist and the foreign ruler, should be deciphered as a metaphor for Hebrewness–foreignness relations.

This observation obliges the reader to also address the woman's role in the narrative. Most commentators focus on the Patriarchs' behavior, while the other part of the stories' plot, the erotic relations between the Hebrew woman and the foreign king, relations that are either forced or allusive, are not usually a subject of discussion. The sexual image enables moving away from the 'educational' trend that has dominated the reading of many, and describing more extensively and richly the tensions between the Hebrew and the other. Extending the discussion in the metaphorical direction reveals additional areas of collective fears in the triple story. These relations move along the tension between mastery and slavery, but also along the contrast between attraction and rejection, national self and the other, cosmopolitanism and assimilation.

11. Petersen, too, refers to the Patriarch's problematic behavior on foreign soil. His reading addresses the stories as educational way-stations in the Patriarchs' lives; that is, he interprets them as biographical stories. Petersen, 'A Thrice-Told Tale'.

12. Susan Niditch, who studied the three stories as part of a folkloristic biblical study that deciphers recurring motifs, also reaches the conclusion that the three stories are about intercultural contact. Like Rosenberg, she too defines the tension between endogamy and exogamy as a central subject in these stories: 'They express deep concern about Israelite identity and have to do ultimately with exogamy and endogamy, with steering the proper course between marriage inside the group and marriage outside the group, with the fear of incest and the fear of foreigners. At issue are maintenance of the group and its culture and the group's relations with the outside world'. See Niditch, 'The Three Wife–Sister Tales of Genesis', p. 66.

The Sexual Image as a Metaphor

From numerous standpoints the image of sexual relations on both sides of the divide constitutes a semiotic signifier of breaking bounds. As Kristeva contends, the daring act of the exile who severs himself from family, language, and homeland to settle in a different place is almost always bound up with sexual system breakdown: from the outset the exile places a question mark over the values and norms of the culture he has abandoned and on the violation of the sacred taboos.[13] It makes absolutely no difference if this breakdown is manifested in orgies or frightened seclusion. The exile's situation, says Kristeva, is always bound up with destruction of the former 'body'.

The biblical narrator does not define the Jewish exile as a potential candidate for breaking of bounds. The foreign world he enters is what he perceives as a dissolute one. On more than one occasion the ancient Jewish literature defines foreign nations as depraved. The Midrash, followed by Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040–1105) and Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160–1235), justify Abraham's conduct by having him fear the menacing sexuality of the foreigner (for some reason the foreigner is always perceived as possessing enhanced sexual potency). Following the Midrash, Rashi puts the following explanation into Abraham's mouth: 'but now we are coming among black and ugly people, the brothers of the Kushim, and they are not accustomed to a beautiful woman' (Rashi, *Lekh-Lekha* 12.11); and Radak says: 'The Egyptians are not as handsome as the Canaanites, but they are ugly for they are southerners and filled with depravity'. According to this interpretation, the Patriarchs consider the foreign nations to possess dark, mainly unbridled sexual lust, namely as representing a life without prohibitions and restrictions, a life that gives freedom to uninhibited urges: 'For I thought, there is surely no fear of God in this place', says Abraham while justifying his deceit to Abimelech (Gen. 20.11).

13. J. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (trans. L.S. Roudiez; New York: Colombia University Press, 1991), pp. 30-31. Kristeva says that even in the era of sexual permissiveness, it is foreigners who easily break sexual taboos, and also the barriers of language and family relations. She gives the example of Muslim women who emigrated to France, and who try to exaggeratedly adopt what they perceive as a behavioral model of the Frenchwoman. It seems to me that this observation requires further examination and updating against the background of radicalization of the Muslim immigrant society in France.

But an accurate reading of the three versions enables separation of the Patriarchs' position and that of the implicit narrator who directs the reader's judgment in another, possibly opposite direction. A boomerang effect is created in the three stories. The projection of sexual degeneracy onto the foreigner comes back and strikes its creator. The phobia that engendered deceitful and manipulative behavior as a defense mechanism against the threat of the dissolute foreign world to Abraham's family, eventually led to the abandoning of the wife to the same situation feared by the husband. Matters took an ironic turn as a result of the husband's initiative. The reproach of the first and second Abimelech demands satisfaction for the foreigner who was perceived by the Patriarch as not possessing—either he or his culture—the same moral norms as the Hebrew. The offender is the lying husband who was liable to bring down 'guilt' on the innocent community of the foreign king. Abraham contends that he used deceit because he felt that 'there is surely no fear of God in this place', but as it turned out, both Pharaoh and Abimelech proved—at least in their words—that Abraham's claim was unfounded. Foreignness and the possibilities of breaking bounds are found on both sides of the divide. The exiled Hebrew is 'foreign' to the culture he has entered or finds himself in, and the inhabitants of that kingdom are 'foreign' to him. It seems that each person on both sides imposes his phobias on the other, and each side is prepared to assume that the other falls short in his moral-sexual customs, when compared with his own.

At this stage we can describe the relations between Hebrewness and foreignness as they are expressed in the triple story as a movement of contact and withdrawal. From the outset the Hebrew woman is starkly signified with a strong sexual signifier, namely as a potential arouser liable to lead to a relationship with the other. The description of her rare beauty appears in the story as a preface to the plot immediately before the entry into the foreign world, and it depicts the woman as a focus of irresistible attraction. And indeed, the charmed and fascinated foreign ruler takes her into his harem, the heart of his private fortress. It appears that the Hebrew Patriarch creates a situation whereby his wife's entry into the harem is unavoidable. In other words, both sides cooperate, even if unconsciously, in creating intercultural contact. The Hebrew side contains the potential of arousal within itself, and the foreign side responds to it and fulfills it. At this stage the result of the contact between the poles is rapid separation and severance of the contact. But—and in my opinion, and this is a fascinating discovery—the foreign world is not described by the implied narrator from a xenophobic position. According to the description of this narrator, the representatives of the 'other'

cultural world represent 'universal' ethical norms, or in any event norms common to both sides, and they do not substantiate the Patriarchs' phobias in either their behavior or speech. On the contrary, God himself is revealed to the foreign king and confirms his good intentions.

Sarah as Wife and 'Sister'

Now that we have concluded the intertextual discussion of the three versions from both the typological and reflective standpoints, still echoing are several of the text's open possibilities that remain unresolved by comparison and resonation. The dilemma created by the triple story can be defined on a binary axis based on two pairs of contrasts creating dialectical tension:

1. The contrast between nature and spirit.
2. The contrast between separatism and cosmopolitanism.

According to my interpretation, Sarah, whose genealogical origins are not mentioned at the beginning of the story, signified the freedom of choice exercised by Abraham at the outset. He did not choose a wife from within the family clan, from his kith and kin, but one from another family whose origins are not mentioned. From this standpoint he acted against 'nature'. Blood relations are not a matter of choice, they are a given. The individual in these relations from the day he is born has the sense of security that goes with being part of a continuum, part of a natural group to which he belongs both biologically and psychologically. They are relations with the similar. The extended family clan was built on blood relations. The wife's absorption into the new clan she has joined only reaches fruition from the moment she produces offspring for her husband. Only then does she join the family circle of blood relations. That is apparently the reason for Jacob's late decision to leave Laban's house. Only after Joseph's birth does Jacob dare to leave his father-in-law's house, since until her son's birth Rachel is still perceived as belonging to Laban's clan, and her father will not release his hold on her. From the moment Joseph is born, blood relations are formed between her and her husband. From now on, by means of their child, she can finally join (or become enslaved to?) her husband's family and free herself of her former one. In many ancient societies marriage was permitted between uncles, nieces, and cousins, and there were societies such as that of ancient Egypt that permitted marriage between brothers and sisters of the royal family.

From this standpoint the marriage of Abraham and Sarah breaks the 'natural' ancient pattern and forms the relationship on a different basis, whose nature, it must be admitted, remains unknown in the story. As a hypothesis deriving from the genealogical context that opens the Abraham stories, we might assume that the choice of Sarah is based on a spiritual partnership, and that Abraham chose an 'ideological partner'.[14]

The relationship between Abraham and Sarah is extraordinary. Despite many years of barrenness in Haran and Canaan, Abraham does not take another wife or wives, and nor does he take concubines as was accepted in the ancient East. Until the moment Sarah suggests to Abraham that he take Hagar, her Egyptian handmaiden, as his wife, their relationship is characterized by complete exclusivity. Sarah's surprising pregnancy during menopause is entirely a divine act running counter to 'nature': 'And the Lord singled out Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had spoken' (Gen. 21.1).

On the binary axis that signifies the contrasting tension between 'nature' and 'spirit', the opening of the Abraham stories therefore signifies a potential relationship on a spiritual basis rather than blood relations. Is this direction fulfilled later? After reading the double story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt and Gerar, the reader must place question marks against the way in which Abraham puts the main points of his new teachings into practice, whose intention from the outset was to 'all the families of the earth', namely, as a vision whose influence would be felt beyond the family-tribal circle.

We can add to the first axis (nature vs. spirit) the contrasting tension between two other poles: openness or seclusion (which will later develop into the tension in Jewish culture between separatism and universal trends). If the earlier hypothesis grounded in the opening of the Abraham stories seeks to offer a new essence based on the 'spirit' and not on blood relations, what, then, does this induce in the intercultural encounter? From the conclusions of the three episodes the readers know that the foreign kings, even Pharaoh, but mainly Abimelech, present ethical-universal principles as the basis of their worldview. In his commentary on Gen. 20.11-12, Robert Alter says:

14. We have already mentioned that Muslim sources relating the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt explain that Abraham asked Sarah not to contradict his statement to the foreign king that she is his sister, for she is his 'sister in religion'. Cited in Firestone, 'Difficulties in Keeping a Beautiful Wife', p. 200.

> What Abraham fears is that Gerar, 'without fear of God' will prove to be another Sodom. In Sodom, two strangers came into town and immediately became objects of sexual assault for the whole male population. Here again, two strangers came into town, one male and one female, and Abraham assumes the latter will be an object of sexual appropriation, the former the target of murder. In the event, he is entirely wrong. Abimelech is a decent, even noble man; and the category of 'Sodom' is not to be projected onto everything that is not the seed of Abraham. On the contrary, later biblical writers will suggest how easily Israel turns itself into Sodom.[15]

What emerges from the above-mentioned situation is that Abraham does not fulfill the universal potential of the mission of 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed', or in other words, the intercultural encounter is not exploited for the dissemination of his new teachings to others. Abimelech king of Gerar experiences a divine revelation and in his speech expresses a worldview based on morality. On the face of it there is a common basis that should have facilitated openness to the other. But it appears that the exile's fear of the 'others' pushes him into a position of seclusion. Sarah, who in the opening of the Abraham stories is presented as 'antigenic', becomes on his suggestion 'his sister'. The expression in its metaphorical meaning signifies exclusive separation in its most extreme form. The couple's relationship becomes 'incestuous'.[16] The Patriarch can only form a relationship with someone very close to him, and 'You are my sister' is presented as a preferred alternative to the 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' option.

We shall now add the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife from Genesis 39 to the pattern of the Patriarchs' stories.

15. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 94.

16. See Gershon Hepner, 'Abraham's Incestuous Marriage with Sarah: A Violation of the Holiness Code', *VT* 2 (2003), pp. 143-55. Hepner does not address the expression 'you are my sister' as a metaphor. He identifies intertextual relationships between the story and the biblical law forbidding incest. In his opinion the story forms intertextual relationship with the story of Lot and his daughters with that of Judah and Tamar, in which there are also incestuous relationships. According to this article, Isaac, like Moab, is the issue of an incestuous relationship.

3

The Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife

Joseph and Potiphar's Wife: The Masculine Model

As I have shown in the previous chapters, the triple story of the Patriarchs established the basic pattern: a Hebrew couple, man and wife, wander through foreign territory; and fearing for his life and possibly both their lives, the husband suggests that the wife present herself to the foreign ruler as his sister; the attempt at saving life by manipulative means fails, and the wife is taken into the ruler's harem and is in great danger. Only through divine intervention is she rescued from the harem and restored to her husband, together with numerous gifts.

According to my classification, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39) belongs to the same basic pattern described in the previous chapters, but it offers a different type of version. The Hebrew Joseph is sold to the Ishmaelites by his brothers and is taken from his home and family. As in the first story of Abraham and Sarai, the foreign territory is Egypt. The power relations are similar: the Hebrew has no rights and is at the mercy of his masters from the hegemonic culture. But unlike the first model in which Hebrewness is represented by a couple, a man and wife, and the wife is placed in an erotic relationship with the foreign king, on this occasion the Hebrew protagonist appears on his own, and is seduced by his master's wife, in whose hands he is for better or for worse.

The Beauty Signifier

Together with his principal quality as a man whose success is due to divine grace, in this story, Joseph, like Sarah, is signified by rare beauty: 'Joseph was comely in features and comely to look at'. Joseph is the only man in the Bible who has been endowed with a dual signifier of beauty. The description of Sarah's beauty, like that of Joseph's rare good looks, appears in the stories' plot at a fateful juncture: close to their entering into an erotic relationship with a representative of the foreign world. Furthermore, from the outset the signifier of Joseph's handsomeness

carries a 'feminine' connotation due both to the dual adjective and also because of the connection formed by the Scripture with the depiction of his mother Rachel, who was also 'comely in features and comely to look at' (Gen. 29.17). The Jewish sages also allude to the sexual ambivalence emerging from the description of Joseph. The title 'Potiphar, a eunuch of Pharaoh' is commented upon in the midrash as follows: 'He was physically castrated, which teaches that Potiphar bought Joseph only for sexual purposes, so the Holy One, blessed be He, physically castrated him' (*Gen. R.*, *Parashah* 86.3).

According to the midrash, Joseph's singular beauty arouses passion in both sexes. In the Bible the Hebrew word *saris* has two meanings: a man occupying a high position in the royal court (a courtier), or a eunuch. If Potiphar was indeed castrated, then this casts a new light on the episode. Is it likely, asks Ron Pirson, that Potiphar's wife's attraction to Joseph was based not on sexual desire, but on her longing for a child, and that Joseph's position in Potiphar's household was similar to that of Hagar in Abraham's family?[1] But if this was Joseph's role in Potiphar's household, if the handsome Joseph was indeed purchased as a sperm donor, asks David Zucker, why would Potiphar's wife need to seduce him? Zucker reaches a different conclusion: in his opinion the problem lies in the power relations between the slave and his mistress, or in other words, the disruption of the master–slave social order in view of Joseph's extraordinary success in his master's household.[2] It seems that this can be proved in the exposition to Genesis 39.

Loss of Identity, Assimilation

Let us examine the exposition to the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife:

> And Joseph was brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, courtier of Pharaoh, the high chamberlain, an Egyptian man, bought him from the hands of the Ishmaelites which had brought him down there. And the Lord was with

1. Pirson seeks to persuade us that this was the nature of the conflict between Joseph and Potiphar's wife. In his opinion Joseph was purchased to serve in the same position as Hagar in the Abraham–Sarah–Hagar triangle. According to him, it is not by chance that the previous chapter (Gen. 38) relates the story of Er and Onan who refused to impregnate Tamar. Pirson compares the three versions of the 'rape' story in Gen. 39, and reaches the conclusion that the insult felt by Potiphar's wife derives from the refusal to impregnate her. Ron Pirson, 'The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife', *SJOT* 18 (2004), pp. 248-59.

2. David J. Zucker, 'Madam Potiphar's Boy Toy: No Laughing Matter', *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 8 (2011), pp. 1-11.

> Joseph and he was a successful man, and he was in the house of the Egyptian master. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and all that he did the Lord made succeed in his hand, and Joseph found favor in his eyes and he ministered to him, and he put him in charge of his house, and all that he had he placed in his hands. And it happened from the time he put him in charge of his house, that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake and the Lord's blessing was on all that he had in house and field. And he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he gave no thought to anything with him there save the bread he ate. And Joseph was comely in features and comely to look at (Gen. 39.1-6).

The Jewish sages discuss the opening of v. 6 in its erotic meaning: 'The bread that he ate is a euphemism [for his wife]' (*Gen. R.*, *Parashah* 86.6). Joseph's words to Potiphar's wife in v. 9 support the midrash: 'and he has held back nothing from me except you, as you are his wife…' Hence the source of the idiom 'the bread he ate' as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (see tractates *Shab.* 62.2; *Ket.* 13.1).

If we choose to read the Genesis 39 story as a representative collective story, we can see how surprising it is in its adaptation to several patent characteristics of Jewish existence in a foreign land as they were formed in the national-popular consciousness in the following generations: rapid success and promotion; relinquishment of elements of authentic identity, assimilation; the success creates hostility in the foreign environment and consequently leads to downfall.

Due to his talents, Joseph, who was in Egypt under duress, slowly climbs the ladder of success: '…and Potiphar, the high chamberlain, an Egyptian man, bought him…; and he was in the house of his Egyptian master…and he ministered to him…and he put him in charge of his house, and all that he had he placed in his hands'. Joseph's progress to success was apparently bound up with the gradual loss of his previous identity. 'Joseph was captivated by the easy life', says Nechama Leibowitz following the Jewish sages, 'he was charmed by the magnificent, cultivated Egypt that was rich in abominations. He was taken by the "favor" he found in his masters' eyes…and forgot that he was a stranger among them and forgot the stark contrast between a free man and bondage… and began moving closer to them',[3] or in the descriptive language of the midrash, 'He began eating and drinking, penciling his eyes, fixing his hair, and prancing about' (*Gen. R.*, *Parashah* 87.3). According to this approach, the seductive power of Potiphar's wife on him should therefore

3. Nechama Leibowitz, *Iyyunim be-sefer bereishit* (Studies in Genesis) (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Department for Torah Education and Culture, 1966), pp. 289-91.

be seen as the intense influence of the foreign cultural world. The narrator highlights the removal of all the barriers between the Hebrew slave and his masters: 'And he left all that he had in Joseph's hands, and he gave no thought to anything with him there save the bread he ate' (Gen. 39.6). 'Save the bread he ate' is a nebulous expression whose exact meaning is not interpreted with any certainty from the context. According to the literal meaning, despite their closeness, the master evidently avoids dining together with the slave, and that is the last remaining barrier marking the class distinction between them (on this verse, see Ibn Ezra following Gen. 43.32).

The exile's encounter is always connected with the breaking of cultural bounds whose representation is expressed both on the social and metaphorical levels. The exposition of Genesis 39 therefore presents all the materials likely to constitute the inevitable conflict. Despite all efforts, will society identify the foreign element 'lurking' within it? And what will be the catalyst that will bring about the outburst of hidden hostility and put it into action?

Between the 'Patriarchs' Model' and the 'Joseph Model'

Let us now read the continuation:

> And it happened after these things that his master's wife raised her eyes to Joseph and said, 'Lie with me', and he refused. And he said to his master's wife, 'Look, my master has given no thought with me here to what is in the house, and all that he has he has placed in my hands. He is not greater in this house than I, and he has held back nothing from me except you, as you are his wife, and how could I do this great evil and give offense to God?' And so she spoke to Joseph day after day, and he would not listen to her, to lie by her, to be with her. And it happened, on one such day, that he came into the house to perform his task, and there was no man of the men of the house there in the house. And she seized him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me'. And he left his garment in her hand and he fled and went out. And so, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and fled outside, she called out to the people of her house and said to them, 'See, he has brought us a Hebrew man to play with us. He came into me to lie with me and I called out in a loud voice, and so, when he heard me raise my voice and call out, he left his garment by me and fled and went out'. And she laid out his garment by her until his master returned to his house. And she spoke to him things of this sort, saying, 'The Hebrew slave came into me, whom you brought us, to play with me. And so, when I raised my voice and called out, he left his garment by me and fled outside. And it happened, when his master heard his wife's words which she spoke to him, saying, 'Things of this sort your slave has done to me', he became incensed. And Joseph's master took him and placed him in the prison-house, the place where the king's prisoners were held (Gen. 39.7-20).

Let us now examine the differences between the triple 'wife–sister' story and this one: The 'Joseph' model offers a different complexity in the Hebrewness–foreignness interplay. In the first model, the triple story, it seems to the Patriarchs that the existential problems (famine, the foreignness of a minority under majority rule) allow them, as a matter of emergency, to place their spouses in potential danger. In all three stories it seems to them that their interpretation of the sociopolitical situation in which they find themselves is unequivocal, and they take action to save their own, and possibly their families' life. In the situation in which they find themselves trapped it seems to them that saving life justifies the use of illegitimate means.[4] 'Say, please, you are my sister', the Patriarch suggests to his wife in order avoid the existential danger that in his opinion both of them face. As I have shown above, the implicit narrator questions the danger facing them, and he also criticizes the need for lying as the manipulative means adopted by the Patriarch attempting to save life at the cost of betraying ethical-cultural principles, as well as inflicting serious harm on his spouse. By means of the rhetorical strategy employed by the narrator, the reader's judgment is shaped in a critical fashion and does not justify the male protagonists' considerations of survival as being exclusive.

In the second model (Joseph and Potiphar's wife), the Hebrew Joseph finds himself in the Egyptian Potiphar's house, cut off from his family and homeland. Here, too, the entry into the foreign world is accomplished by lying. Joseph's brothers sell him as if he were a slave, and he does not tell the truth about his status to a soul. The slave is successful in his master's house, and it seemingly appears that the distinction between the foreign and Hebrew worlds is blurred. Joseph's situation in Potiphar's house ostensibly enables him to accumulate power and delusionally see himself as a 'master': the foreign world enables him to act in accordance with his talents, and progress to the point of delusions of almost complete acceptance. Only one last barrier separates him from his master, which Potiphar's wife seeks to remove.

The delusional confidence of the Hebrew 'slave' who rapidly climbs the ladder of success is shattered from the moment that he rejects the advances of Potiphar's wife. It is then that real mastership shows its claws. With a clever and manipulative move the woman activates her household and her husband to wreak vengeance on the man who rejected her advances. Using cunning stratagems she enlists the deep-seated

4. See also Zakovitch, 'Disgrace'.

hostility of her Egyptian slaves toward the Semite foreigner ('See, he has brought us a Hebrew man to play with us') in order to put the Hebrew slave in his place.[5]

Reflective Reading

Together with the common situation, a comparison between the two models underscores several different elements: in the first model (the Patriarchs' stories), the representations of Hebrewness are a couple, man and wife, and foreignness is represented by a man, the king who rules the country or city. The erotic relations are between the foreign ruler and the Hebrew woman; the danger is perceived as existential and it appears that protection of life is bound up with ethical relinquishments. Hereafter I shall call this model (in which the Hebrew woman is placed in a relationship with the foreigner) 'the feminine model'. The woman in this model is passive and acquiescent, albeit not on her own initiative, whereas in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (hereafter 'the masculine model') the dominant woman is foreign, and the man a Hebrew. The foreign society encourages the protagonist to relinquish his unique cultural identity, and assimilate into the foreign world in which he finds himself, and it even grants him positions of power and extensive material perquisites. In this pattern the foreign woman is the seduction agent, and she represents an intensification of the foreign world's attraction, both culturally and sexually. The main difference between the models is manifested in the protagonist's stance against the influences of the foreign world. In the masculine model the protagonist overcomes temptation and loyally represents the values of Hebrew culture: 'and how could I do this great evil and give offense to God?' (Gen. 39.10) Joseph asks Potiphar's wife in the final chord of his rejection speech. In the wake of his passing this test Joseph is dubbed 'Joseph the Righteous' in post-biblical literature, and also gains a special place in Islamic traditions which retell the story.[6] Furthermore, if in the feminine model the Patriarch projects his sexual anxieties onto the foreigner—unjustifiably, as we have shown—then the masculine model story confirms these anxieties: Potiphar's wife is truly portrayed as a provocative initiator of wanton sexual licentiousness.

5. See a comparative analysis of the scriptural story of the 'rape' with the story told by Potiphar's wife to her household and afterward to her husband, in Leibowitz, *Iyyunim be-sefer bereishit*, pp. 294-98. A comparative analysis, but with different conclusions can be found in the above-mentioned articles by Pirson and Zucker.

6. See the chapter on Joseph in the Koran, Surah 12. *The Koran* (trans. with notes by N.J. Dawood; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).

What else does the reader gain from exposure of the intertextual connection between the Patriarchs' triple story and that of Joseph and Potiphar's wife? If we stop at a linear reading of the Abraham stories, then our study will focus on the triple story in the local context: the various tests faced by Abraham until his figure as the nation's leader is formed. The three stories will be presented as Abraham's repeated tests (or failures) on his road to attaining his mission: undisputed belief in God, a symbol and example for 'all the families of the earth'; a linear reading of the Joseph stories will position the story on the plot axis familiar to us from these stories; descending into the pit for the purpose of emerging from it. Whereas an intertextual reading creates synchronic and diachronic correlations with the Patriarchs' triple stories, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (and later with the book of Esther, which is a composite of both models)[7] creates an additional field of meaning: the relationship between Hebrewness and the other in a foreign territory. According to the different variations of this pattern, the entry into foreign territory is attended by great danger, but also by opportunities: seduction and attraction (demonstrated by the erotic tension between the poles, tension based on the Hebrew protagonists' rare beauty), the opportunity of gaining material wealth and climbing the ladder of success, but also a heavy price—the need to employ deceitful, manipulative means that threaten the authentic identity, pandering for Sarah (or Hadassah who became Esther, as I will show later in the context of the book of Esther) and imprisonment.

A comparison between the two patterns should lead the reader to a clear conclusion: the masculine version seeks to offer a monosemic ideological message. The signification of otherness in the Joseph story is unequivocal and stereotypical: the foreign woman is described as demonic-destructive, whereas in contrast the Hebrew man is 'Joseph the Righteous', the Chosen of God who succeeds in all his deeds, for God is with him. The ethical ambivalence that attends the implicit author in the feminine triple story is replaced by a very clear tipping of the scales in the masculine model. The Hebrewness–foreignness dichotomy is intensified. The story marks out a clear borderline between the Hebrew pole, which holds one exclusive belief, and the foreign pole that attempts to subvert it.

7. The narrator of the book of Esther was aware of the ideational correlation between the above-mentioned stories. The book of Esther contains numerous allusions both to the story of Abraham and Sarah and that of Joseph in Egypt. See Yair Zakovitch, 'Through the Looking Glass: Reflections/Inversions of Genesis Stories in the Bible', *BibInt* 1 (1993), pp. 139-52.

Later Readings of the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife

The later midrashic sages who lived permanently in the Diaspora attempted to blur the ideological unequivocalness represented by the Joseph model. Later readings of Genesis 39 identify areas of obscuration in the masculine model too. Filling the gaps in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife as this emerges in post-biblical and midrashic literature complicates and blunts the unequivocal conclusion presented in ch. 39.

In order to adapt the didactic masculine model, in which Hebrewness is attributed with a proud, uncompromising stance against the foreign world within the ambivalent reality of ongoing life in the Diaspora, the midrashic literature offers two 'corrective' options: one attempts to moderate the stereotypical image of Potiphar's wife as a symbol of the seductive, devouring woman, whereas the other seeks to question Joseph's unambiguous stance as the righteous man who does not submit to seduction. These two options seek to moderate the conflict, to reduce the gap between the Hebrew and the foreign poles, and attain a compromise between them.

The Midrashic Sages Question Joseph's Behavior

The commentators and expositors typically identify subversive allusions between the lines of the antecedent biblical story. An accurate reading of the biblical story from an 'objectionist' perspective raises questions regarding Joseph's flawless behavior: Does the story not hint at the fact that the man, Joseph, is to a certain extent responsible for breaking all the woman's bounds of morality?

The Scripture tells us that the 'garment episode' takes place after a prolonged process of seduction in which Joseph had to withstand the woman's persistent importuning day after day. And then one day Joseph goes into the house to attend to his duties, 'and there was no man of the men of the house there in the house' (v. 11). The midrash explains that it was an Egyptian holiday on which the Nile rises, and everybody went out to the river to take part in the celebrations:

> And it was after this that the brook of Egypt was filled above all its sides, and all the inhabitants of Egypt went forth, and also the king and princes went forth with timbrels and dances, for it was a great rejoicing in Egypt, and a holiday at the time of the inundation of the sea Shihor, and they went there to rejoice all the day… But Zelicha would not go with them, for she said, I am indisposed, and she remained alone in the house.[8]

8. *The Book of Yashar* (trans. Mordechai Manuel Noah; New Matter: Hermon Press, 1972), p. 139. This source is based on earlier sources. Cf. *Gen. R.* 87.7: 'R. Judah said, "It was a festival day for the Nile. Everybody went to see it, but he went to the household to take up his master's account books".'

Following James Kugel, Alice Bach[9] views Joseph going into the house when nobody is in as an intentional act whose outcome he had to foresee. Anyone who knowingly puts himself into a charged situation, attended by the most opportune conditions for a sexual encounter, is playing with fire. Joseph's hasty exit from the house can also be interpreted as a young man's frightened reaction to the audacious sexual advances of the woman, who on this occasion went beyond the verbal pleadings to which Joseph was already accustomed (and which he possibly looked forward to).

The midrashic sages, too, are not overly impressed by the sexual restraint of Joseph the Righteous. They view the Potiphar's wife episode as a sort of punishment for the arrogance characterizing the young Joseph's conduct. His insolent character plays a leading role in the action, and in any case it is he who is responsible—at least partially—for what took place between him and Potiphar's wife. Joseph is described in this midrash, which is mentioned above, as a narcissistic, almost feminine figure constantly preoccupied with enhancing his appearance:

> The matter may be compared to the case of a man who was sitting in the marketplace and penciling his eyes, fixing his hair and prancing about. He said, 'I am a real man'. They said to him, 'If you are a real man, lo, there is a she-bear before you. Attack it' (*Gen. R.*, *Parashah* 87.3).

Commentators and expositors raise further questions, for they knew human nature well, especially regarding the restraint of the young man at the peak of his sexual prowess, in the face of the attractive woman's persistent attempts at seduction:

> A noble lady asked R. Yose, 'Is it possible that Joseph, at the age of seventeen, in his full vigor, could have done such a thing?' (*Gen. R.*, *Parasha* 87.6).

The midrashic commentators address the phrase 'and there was no man' (v. 11) in *Genesis Rabbah*: 'He actually tried, but found that he was not a man', or in other words, Joseph submitted to his mistress's seduction and went into her bed, but at the last moment was unable to attain an erection. Other references can be found in *Tanhuma*, a post-ninth-century midrash: 'He laid with her, sought himself and was unable'.

The midrash therefore undermines the unambiguous description of Joseph as a righteous man, and guesses that to one degree or another, the attraction and passion were mutual. In their view, assimilation

9. A. Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 90.

(represented here in the form of the seductive foreign woman) seems almost natural, and the figure of Joseph the Righteous is perceived by this midrash as exaggerated idealization.

The Lovesick Potiphar's Wife

Later adaptations made to the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife can shed light on the type of changes effected in Jewish society in the Diaspora, and explain the changes in ideological points of departure regarding the exile situation. Some of these changes focus on reshaping the figure of the seductive foreign woman, Potiphar's wife. In this regard, much can be learned from Alice Bach's feminist study. She leads the reader along a horizon-broadening path, from the biblical story, through the ancient midrashic literature, to the Apocrypha, Flavius Josephus, and the Koran.[10] Collecting narrative fillers from the various sources expands the story of Potiphar's wife and accords it a personal presence (Bach gives the protagonist the name Mut-em-enet, following Thomas Mann in his monumental 1937 novel, *Joseph and his Brothers*; the later midrashim gave her the Persian name, Zuleika). In this way the researcher removes the figure from the instrumental-didactic role forced upon her by the narrator ('a foreign woman'), and redefines her in accordance with the literary 'lovesick woman' model.

Bach tries to shift the reader's focus of observation from the exclusive story of Joseph to that of Potiphar's wife. The Bible does not provide the reader with any information on either her figure or her personality. Potiphar has a long series of titles establishing his status in the social hierarchy, whereas she is only 'the titled man's wife'. Bach's discussion, which reads the story 'against the current', focuses on the attempt to remove the figure of Potiphar's wife from the simplistic perception of her as a stereotype of the 'foreign woman'. In Bach's opinion, the figure of Mut-em-enet can correspond with the 'lovesick woman' motif well known in world literature (for example, Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and later Racine's *Phaedra*). The lovesick woman does not act out of malice or evil, and sexual corruption is not an inherent characteristic in her.[11] But, Bach says, with our entry into the female domain we are only the ideological narrator's 'guests', not of Potiphar's wife. Joseph's proud stance, his refusal to submit to the sexual advances of another man's wife is, according to the narrator's worldview, the right decision. This is the way the ideal

10. Bach, *Women, Seduction*, pp. 34-127.
11. Bach, *Women, Seduction*, pp. 101-102.

protagonist should choose in order to escape the feminine chaos threatening the orderly masculine world. The verse describing Joseph's beauty is a sort of 'conductor' that leads the reader from the ideological-masculine framework into the plot. From this moment the story shifts from the man's stable, orderly, normative world to the woman's bounds-breaking, passionate one. Like Joseph, who goes into the house of Potiphar's wife, from that moment the readers, too, are in another world. Unlike the wealth, property, and stability of the masculine world, dominant in this one are sexual hunger and passion that break the normative rules of the game.

The first, post-biblical source reviewed by Bach is *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.[12] There is no doubt that Joseph's confession in the testament named after him was written to affirm the 'Joseph the Righteous' image, yet additional story fragments can be extracted from it that shed light on the figure of Potiphar's wife in a more complex fashion than that which emerges from the Genesis 39 story. These characteristics do not chime with the stereotypical image as it emerges from the biblical story.[13]

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs source assumes that Joseph spent some time in the house of the Ishmaelite merchant, and according to the story, there, too, the Hebrew youth brought prosperity to his master's house. According to *The Testament of Joseph* in *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, it was Potiphar's wife who rescued Joseph from the Ishmaelite merchant who bought him from his brothers. After hearing of the Hebrew youth's success in the Ishmaelite's house, she sought to bring him into her own household. Influenced by his wife, Potiphar tries to take the youth from the merchant's house employing a legal stratagem. He accuses the merchant of stealing a free youth from Canaan and enslaving him. But Joseph, who does not wish to implicate his brothers,

12. A comprehensive review of the state of the research of *The Testaments* can be found in H.W. Hollander and M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), pp. 1-8. It appears that most researchers concur that the text is Judeo-Hellenistic in origin and dates from the first or second century BCE, to which Christian additions were made later; due to the dominance of the tribe of Levi in the text, Kahana estimates that it was written during the Hasmonean period, when the priesthood was united with the kingdom. The text came to us from Greek manuscripts dated from the eighth century CE. See Hollander and de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, p. 10. Another research approach ascribes all of this text to Christian sources from the first or second century CE. See Robert A. Kugler, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

13. Hollander and de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, pp. 362-409.

corroborates the Ishmaelite's version of the story. Potiphar, who seeks the truth of the matter, orders that Joseph be stripped and flogged in the market square to extract a different confession from him:

> And he said unto me: Truly thou liest; and straightway he commanded me to be stripped and beaten. Now, the Memphian woman was looking through a window at me while I was being beaten, for her house was near (*T. Jos.* 35).

According to *The Testament of Joseph*, this is the moment when for the first time Joseph is exposed to the look of Potiphar's wife: she is looking through a window and seeing how the naked, handsome Joseph is being flogged in the square. The biblical story relates that the woman 'sees' Joseph: '…his master's wife raised her eyes to Joseph…' (Gen. 39.7). *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* goes even further, describing in detail and erotic-sensual colors with sado-masochistic overtones, the fateful moment when inextinguishable passion is aroused in the woman.

According to *The Testament of Joseph*, the first encounter between the two is charged with intense sexual tension, even before the commencement of their mistress–slave relations. In the wake of her look, the woman undertakes a rescue operation. She rescues Joseph from the Ishmaelite, buys him at a high price, and seemingly seeks to adopt him as her son: 'And a son she had not and she sought to adopt me as her own son and I prayed to the Lord that she should bear a son; and for many days she embraced me as a son and I knew not' (3.7-8). Her desire for Joseph is not presented in the text of *The Testament of Joseph* as a fleeting whim, but as the main force that drives the plot: she demands from her husband that he free the slave and he buys him from the wily merchant at an exorbitant price, while she is responsible for bringing him into Potiphar's house, with a status different to that of an ordinary slave.

The lovesick woman motif also appears in later midrashim, and perhaps it is also based on ancient sources. The midrash in *Tanhuma* (*Vayeshev* 5) tells the well-known story of the *etrogs* (citrons). The opening, 'Our forefathers said', proves that this came from an ancient source. The following is an excerpt from the midrash, in which the seductress has a (Persian) forename (Zelicha):

> And when she could not prevail over him, to persuade him, and her soul being still fixed upon him, her desire threw her into a grievous sickness.
>
> And all the women of Egypt came to visit her, and they said unto her, why art thou in this declining state? Thou that lackest nothing; surely thy husband is a great and esteemed prince in the sight of the king, shouldst thou lack anything of what your heart desireth?

> And Zelicha answered them, saying, this day it shall be made known to you, whence this disorder springs in which you see me, and she commanded her maidservants to prepare food for all the women, and she made a banquet for them, and all the women ate in the house of Zelicha.
>
> And she gave them knives to peel the citrons to eat them, and she commanded that they should dress Joseph in costly garments, and that he should appear before them, and Joseph came before their eyes and all the women looked on Joseph, and could not take their eyes from off him, and they all cut their hands with the knives they had in their hands, and all the citrons were filled with blood.
>
> And they knew not what they had done but they continued to look at the beauty of Joseph, and did not turn their eyelids from him.
>
> And Zelicha saw what they had done, and she said unto them, what is this work that you have done? I gave you citrons to eat and you all cut your hands.
>
> And all the women saw their hands, and behold they were full of blood, and their blood flowed down upon their garments, and they said unto her, this slave in your house has overcome us, and we could not turn our eyelids from him on account of his beauty.
>
> And she said unto them, surely this happened to you in the moment that you looked at him, and you could not contain yourselves from him; how then can I refrain when he is constantly in my house, and I see him day after day going in and out of my house? How then can I keep from declining or even from perishing on account of this?

The ancient tradition of the *etrogs* story later moves on to the Great Midrash, Surah 12 of the Koran, and the book of Yashar, a thirteenth-century Italian work. All of them tell of the lovesick Potiphar's wife who invites the high society women to visit. She arranges a feast, gives them all *etrogs* and sharp knives to peel them with. At the height of the feast she commands Joseph to appear in his finest clothes. The stunned women, who cannot tear their eyes away from the handsome Joseph, cut their hands with the sharp knives and their blood stains their finery. Thus the women of Egypt react in the text of the Koran: 'And when they saw him they exalted him and cut their hands, exclaiming: Allah protect us! This is not a human being. This is none other than some gracious angel' (Koran, Surah 12.31).

Bach contends that when the story focuses on the collective perspective of the women, it is given a new dimension. The evil gossip about the aberrant behavior of Potiphar's wife, the wife of a high-ranking chamberlain who fell in love with a Canaanite slave employed in her house, is replaced by something else. The women of the Egyptian court were as captivated as she was by Joseph's charms, and their excited reaction reflects exactly what is in her mind. From now on she is no longer the wanton woman whose behavior contravenes the rules of morality. The women's amazement at Joseph's appearance proves to the

reader that Mut-em-enet behaved as any other woman would. By means of the female audience, Potiphar's wife emerges from her isolation as a woman who breaks bounds, and she is able to present her problem to other women, women of equal status, and through them gain empathy, a feeling that is not aroused in the reader of the Genesis story.[14]

Another aspect of the story of Potiphar's wife as it appears in the apocryphal literature and the midrash relates to her behavior after Joseph's incarceration. The biblical story, whose sole interest is proving Joseph's proper conduct, shows no interest in the woman's fate from the moment the seduction story ends with Joseph passing the test. But the text of *The Testament of Joseph*, for instance, continues the woman's story after the accusation scene. The protracted seduction does not end with Joseph being cast into the prison-house: 'How often hath she sent unto me, saying, Consent to fulfill my desire, and I will release thee from thy bonds, and I will free time from the darkness!' (9.1). Midrash *Tanhuma* goes into greater detail:

> Even when Joseph was imprisoned in the prison-house, his travails still beset him because of the stratagems of his master's wife, for her love for him was like a flame burning in a furnace, and even when her husband Potiphar wished to kill him, she did not let him and said to him: Why lose your property? Leave him in the prison-house until you sell him and regain your money. She did all this lest he might finally submit to her (*Tanh.*, *Vayeshev*, 9; see also *Gen. R.* 87.10).

Potiphar's House Undergoes 'Conversion': Joseph's Marriage to Asenath

The revisions and changes introduced into the story by the Jewish sages and later expositors seek to narrow the ethnic and religious gap in the original story. Some midrashim plant 'converting' elements in the original story. In Genesis 41 we read that 'Pharaoh called Joseph Zaphenth-paneha and he gave him Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On, as wife'. The similarity between 'Potiphar' and 'Poti-phera' sparked the imagination of the midrashic sages, who made a connection between the names and decided that Potiphar and Poti-phera were one and the same (*Gen. R.* 86.3, and also according to *Jub.* 40.10).[15] They also discussed the figure of Asenath, Joseph's wife. One puzzling midrash identifies her as the daughter of Dinah daughter of Jacob. According to the midrash

14. Bach, *Women, Seduction*, pp. 124-25.

15. This apparently refers to someone else, since in the story Potiphar is presented as a holder of high office in the king's service, not as a priest. On is not the name of an Egyptian deity but of a city, which was later called Heliopolis by the Greeks and was a centre of sun worship. See Alter, *Genesis*, p. 241.

(*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* on Gen. 38), Dinah fell pregnant to Shechem son of Hamor and gave birth to Asenath. Her brothers wanted to kill the infant 'child of prostitution'. Jacob, who wanted to save her, fashioned an amulet for her on which God's name was inscribed, and the Angel Gabriel bore her to Egypt where he placed her in the house of Poti-phera, who adopted the child. Joseph, who identified her origin and knew she was not an Egyptian, took her as his wife. According to this midrash, Joseph married his niece.

According to the Syrian version of the Asenath legend it was an eagle, not the Angel Gabriel, that took the infant and placed it on the altar in Egypt, where it was found by Potiphar the priest who, since he was childless, adopted her.[16] Another midrash relates that Potiphar was walking by the city walls, where the infant had been left (like Pharaoh's daughter who went to bathe with her handmaidens) and he heard a baby crying. He took the child, read the inscription on the amulet hung around its neck, realized that she was of high birth, and adopted her. According to this midrash it was Asenath who saved Joseph from Potiphar's wife by telling her adoptive father the truth about what had taken place between Joseph and his wife. But other ancient midrashim assume that Asenath was Potiphar's natural daughter: 'She foresaw through her horoscope that she was destined to produce a son with him, but she did not know whether it was from her or from her daughter' (*Gen. R.*, *Parasha* 85.2). In other words, this midrash connects Joseph with the house of Potiphar (not Poti-phera) by marriage, and thus Potiphar's wife becomes his mother-in-law…

The Legend of Joseph and Asenath

The legend of Joseph and Asenath was greatly expanded in the Syrian and Greek languages. Researchers contend that the tale was apparently written in Egypt between the second century BCE and the first century CE. Its historical origins are still being debated, but numerous versions are available today: sixteen in Greek, and others in Slavic, Syrian, Armenian, and Latin.[17]

16. In Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*. II. *Joseph* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

17. The most up to date study of the legend is that by Rivka Nir. Nir, who studied all the story's versions, found no fewer than sixteen versions in Greek, from the most ancient text dating from the sixth century CE to texts from the nineteenth century, a total of some eighty texts in various languages. R. Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth: A Christian Book* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), p. 3.

The legend tells the tale of the beautiful, virginal Asenath who fell in love with the handsome Joseph, who seemed like a son of the gods. The Egyptian princess who fell in love with Joseph cannot fulfill her love due to the ethnic and religious differences between them. She decided to convert, thus removing the barrier separating them. Joseph sees Asenath observing him from her tower window and falls in love with her. Pharaoh's son, who also has amorous intentions toward Asenath and is jealous of the successful Joseph, tries to enlist the help of Joseph's brothers in the murderous plot he has hatched against him. He is fully aware of the ambivalent relationship between Joseph and his brothers, and makes them an offer they cannot refuse: he will assassinate his father and they will assassinate Joseph. If the plot is successful, the brothers will assume Joseph's high office in the kingdom, while he will succeed to the throne and win Asenath. The plot is foiled by Benjamin. The young Benjamin, galloping in his chariot with the beautiful Asenath beside him, runs down Pharaoh's son, who loses consciousness and is unable to complete the assassination of his father. Joseph and Asenath are separated in the heat of battle, but divine intervention rescues Asenath from their assailants. Levi stops Benjamin from killing Pharaoh's son so the latter will not have guilt on his head and blood on his hands. The story ends with Asenath's conversion;[18] Joseph's evil brothers reach reconciliation with their brother and even find themselves a new father in Pharaoh. Thus, says Bach, the ethnic and religious rift between the Egyptian and Jews is healed with the same facility that Pharaoh's son picks himself up and washes the blood from his face. The otherness and foreignness are erased from the story, and its protagonists can rule in Egypt and live happily ever after…[19]

Significance of the Findings in the Sociopolitical Interpretation

Alice Bach's feminist discussion focuses mainly on the figure of Potiphar's wife, whom she tries to remove from the biblical and post-biblical texts and show her as a complex figure worthy of empathy, at least from female readers. But by using the midrashic and epigraphic texts collected

18. Rivka Nir proves that the story contains numerous allusions, images, and metaphors showing a process of Christian, not Jewish, conversion. In her opinion the text is a Christian, not Jewish document. This possibility also presents a process of moving closer to a world of monotheistic values, which brings the Hebrew Joseph and the other closer. Nir, *Joseph and Asenath*.

19. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, II, pp. 170-78; Bach, *Women, Seduction*, p. 120.

for the feminist discussion, we can, as I have shown, also base the socio-political interpretation on what emerges from the reviewed texts. From a study of the changes made by the expositors to the antecedent biblical story, the following picture emerges: the image of the Hebrew man facing the foreign culture and and not submitting to it is replaced in the midrashic texts by a more ideologically complex version—the exiled Hebrew man does not remain completely indifferent to the foreign woman's charms and the influence of her cultural world. The figure of the foreign woman representing foreignness undergoes an even more complex process: first she is removed from the demonic image ('a foreign woman', 'a sinful woman'), and the negative stereotype is replaced by an empathetic universal image: 'a lovesick woman'. As we have seen, some midrashim even attempt to convert Potiphar's house. The main motivation of the woman represented in the midrashim, which we termed 'converting', is her fervent desire to form a relationship with Joseph, and through it connect with Jewish heritage, by adopting him as her son, through sexual intercourse, or marriage. The conclusion reached from study of the midrashim is that the exile experience, which for the majority of the Jewish people living in various diasporas since the destruction of the Second Temple, became a reality, apparently created special defense mechanisms that are expressed in the changes introduced by the later midrashic sages. The original story—Genesis 39—that presents a monosemic ideological model that lauds entrenchment in the values of Jewish culture, threatened the possibility of living within the compromises and necessities of the reality, and mandated changes in the original model. Represented in these changes is a premise according to which the intercultural relationship is possible. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the bridges built by these midrashim are always one-way, since the Jewish man will never recognize the values of the foreign world. It is always the Hebrew world that is joined, whereas it is the foreign side that initiates building the bridge out of recognition in the exclusive truth of the faith of the Hebrew side.

4

The Book of Esther: Living in Duality

The Book of Esther as a Mega Meta-Text

The book of Esther (hereafter 'the Megillah'), the entire plot of which takes place in exile, is one of the Bible's later books whose historical background remains obscure.[1] Some biblical scholars think that the work was written in exile, some one hundred or one hundred and fifty years after the destruction of the First Temple (between 500 and 400 BCE).[2] Others rely on the fact that we have no knowledge of edicts against the Jews in the region during the Persian hegemony period (c. 500–331 BCE), and therefore think that events reflect the period of Hellenistic rule at the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (332–141 BCE).[3] It seems that the only point of agreement is that this is a plot that takes place in exile that has become a permanent way of life.[4]

1. David J.A. Clines, 'In Quest of the Historical Mordecai', *VT* 41 (1991), pp. 129-36.

2. According to the description in the Megillah, N.G. Cohen posits that the king is Khshayarsha, whose name was rendered as Xerxes by the Greeks. He ruled Persia and Media between 485 and 465 BCE. Others hold that this is another king, Artaxerxes, the Greek equivalent of Artakhshasta, who ruled Persia between 404 and 350 BCE. This hypothesis is based mainly on Plutarch, who described the customs of Artakhshasta's court, particularly that of examining beautiful young girls who appeared before the king. See N.G. Cohen in the introduction to *Megillat Esther: perush le-hamesh megillot* (The Book of Esther: Commentary on Five Megillot) (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute, 1990). See also Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 131-40.

3. Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), pp. 169-73.

4. Among the studies on the Megillah as an exile work, see Adele Berlin, 'The Book of Esther: Writing a Commentary for a Jewish Audience', in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (ed. S. White Crawford and L.G. Greenspoon; JSOTSup, 380; London: T. & T. Clark International, 2003), pp. 77-90.

From the rich intertextual language of the Megillah it is clearly evident that its writer was familiar with its antecedent biblical stories, and even made clever use of those that suited his ideological needs. Of the biblical texts in which we identified the recurring man–woman relations motif as a metaphor for Jewish–Gentile relations, it is without doubt the meta-text carrying the maximal potential of information,[5] or as Adele Berlin puts it, this is a text containing a conglomeration of literary motifs. Berlin concludes that it is essentially a literary work, not a historical one. The narrator did not intend to write a history, but to imitate historiographic writing. In her view his writing is influenced by biblical motifs, by the style used in descriptions of Persian royal courts, and by motifs from a wide range of contemporaneous Hellenistic literature.[6]

As we shall see, the midrashic sages as well as commentators and researchers of recent generations discovered, either partially or wholly, traces of numerous biblical texts embedded in the work, and proposed a considerable number of possibilities for determining its overall meaning. The multiplicity of potential intertextual connections created by the Megillah with additional biblical stories makes it difficult for the reader to see the wood for the trees. Some researchers base their studies on recurring motifs, others seek assistance from the usage of rare words, and some rely on comparisons with other biblical figures. Each of these readings attempts to propose an overall meaning based on their findings, and the meaning varies in accordance with the analogical elements they choose.[7] I must, of course, confess that my reading takes from the

5. Ziva Ben-Porat, 'Beyn textualiut'; and 'The Poetics of Literary Allusion', *PTL* 1 (1976), pp. 105-28.

6. A. Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling', *JBL* 120.1 (2001), pp. 3-14.

7. For example, Jonah Schellekens found a connection between the type-scene of Mordecai's rise to high office and the additional type-scenes of the rise to rule of other leaders such as Moses, David, and Joash. See Jonah Schellekens, 'Accession and Holidays: The Origin of the Jewish Festival of Purim', *JBL* 128 (2009), pp. 115-34. The reader will find a similar direction in Zvi Ron's article, who also based his study on comparative research of the type-scenes: a scene at whose centre stands 'the wise courtier' who gains success in the world of exile. The analogies it creates connect the story of the Megillah with the rise of Joseph in Pharaoh's court, and of Daniel in the court of Belshazar: Zvi Ron, 'The "Wise Courtier" in Rabbinic Literature', *JBQ* 39 (2011), pp. 169-74. To my mind, observation of this kind does not stray from the definition of a recurring motif, and its contribution to structuring the overall meaning of the Megillah is only partial. The reader will find another example in Jonathan Grossman, 'Dynamic Analogies in the Book of Esther', *VT* 59 (2009), pp. 399-414.

Megillah the possibilities supporting the ideological foundations I try to lay in the present discussion.

According to my reading there are at least four independent referential stories in the Megillah: the story of Joseph; the story of Saul and his war against the Amalekites; the stories of Jacob and Esau; and the triple story of the Patriarchs who hand over their wives to a foreign king. According to this approach, the Megillah is part of a larger 'text' whose reading mandates reexamination compared with similar stories that preceded it. Such a complex system of signifiers that were consciously and intentionally introduced into the work almost always serves an ideological direction. Later in the discussion I shall attempt to prove how the intertextual patterning chosen by me contributes to the construction of the Megillah's meaning, and how it supports or refutes interpretations based on content analysis.

Content Analysis Interpretation

In order to compare intertextual methods with a method essentially based on content analysis, I shall present the main thrust of the interpretations of Shlomo Dov Goitein (1963)[8] and Eliezer Schweid (1984).[9] In the Megillah's descriptions and convoluted plot, Goitein identifies a clearly foreign tone.[10] There is no mention of the existence of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel. Were it not for one sentence that tells us of Mordecai's origins and lineage—'who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away' (Est. 2.6)—we would not know that this dispersed people had any homeland whatsoever. Thus, for example, Mordecai and Esther determine a holy day for the Jews without consulting the religious authorities in either Jerusalem or Shushan, capital of the world where the fate of the Jews is decided.

Grossman's textual pool includes several analogies, some of which also serve my own interpretation, such as the story of Joseph in Egypt and Saul's war against the Amalekites, but also others such as the death of David and the book of Daniel. On occasion Grossman himself contends that the analogy he formed is incomplete, hence his definition on 'dynamic analogies'.

8. S.D. Goitein, *Iyyunim ba-mikra* (Bible Studies) (Tel Aviv: Yavne, 1963).

9. E. Schweid, '*Hester hapanim hakaful—Purim haga shel ha-galut*' (Dual Masking—Purim, the Diaspora Festival), in *Sefer makhzor hazemanim* (The Book of the Cycle of Times) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984), pp. 123-42.

10. Goitein, *Iyyunim ba-mikra*, pp. 59-71.

Goitein holds that the Megillah's axis is the king. The other books of the Bible do not forget to remind readers that powerful kings and potentates are but God's pawns, whereas the Megillah makes no mention at all of God's name. The narrator enjoys describing the feast, the garden, the blue tents sheltering the guests, and the wine goblets in great detail; Vashti surely did the right thing by not showing herself to the drunken guests on the seventh day of the feast, but the story does not judge her conduct favorably; the description of the virgins and their preparations for meeting the king resembles a recipe for a dish, and even the end of the story in which Mordecai parades before the king in regal finery, blue and purple, a gold crown on his head, and mounted on the king's steed, reveals more than a trace of submission to the values of a hedonistic world; wine, a king, and a woman are the three dominant forces in the world of this work, and in the best tradition of Persian court literature it is the woman who brings salvation. The foreign influence of Persian culture pervaded the writer's world, and it seems that he has accepted the central material and spiritual values of the foreign world.

On the other hand, Goitein contends that the Megillah still has a 'Jewish tone': the king is not only a ruler, but is ruled (by wine, his chief counselor, and the woman). Although he is at the centre of events, he is presented as flesh and blood, and even as a fool. Esther relies not only on her grace and beauty, but also on fasting, personal and public, and first and foremost Mordecai and Esther remain true to their people and religion, not their high status.[11]

Schweid's discussion of the Purim festival also defines the Megillah's conflict as one between two worldviews. The 'value system' reflected in the sumptuous feast sanctifies 'the excessive, profligate gratification, overwhelming gratification of sensual lust: eating, drinking, fine attire, magnificent buildings and gardens, gratification of sexual lust'.[12] Moreover, Schweid goes on, the sensual-lustful gratification is not at the level of a primal instinctual urge. Clearly evident in the depravity of the court is a high level of refinement; this is a developed culture that elevates sensual gratification to the level of an art, and therefore it is so important for it to display its achievements. Furthermore, rule is not perceived as a means of achieving order, stability, security in the face of enemies, but as rule for rule's sake, almost for its very existence. Schweid ponders the attitude of the Megillah's protagonists to these values. According to their

11. Goitein, *Iyyunim ba-mikra*, pp. 67-69.
12. Schweid, '*Hester hapanim hakaful*', p. 127.

acts and behavior it seems that this value system is also theirs, since the narrator does not voice a single critical comment. Yet it seems to Schweid that the story derides its characters and even its tellers. How, then, is the covert criticism emerging from the story felt without a specific statement? In his opinion the answer is in the delicate counterpoint of the plot's situations, such as the contrast between the Megillah's exposition that presents the king as the ruler of one hundred and twenty-seven countries, and his domination by his wife in his own house; as a ruler ruled by his urges, as a king ruled by his own law, who is unable to break it even after he has changed his mind.[13] And indeed, the irony with which the Megillah deals with Ahasuerus and Haman as representatives of governmental conduct and passion is sufficiently prominent in the narrative fabric. But where is the criticism directed against the Megillah's Jewish protagonists? All the examples provided by Schweid actually support the previous conclusion: according to their deeds and behavior it seems that the court's value system is also their own, and even though they do not deny their Judaism to themselves, they seek to conceal it from their surroundings. The names Mordecai and Esther call to mind the names of the gods Marduk and Ashtar; Esther's participation with all the other virgins in the beauty contest to become queen shows that she did not attempt to avoid this act that ran counter to Jewish morality, and from Mordecai's explicit order to her not to reveal her Jewish origins we learn that the Jews of Shushan kept their religion secret. 'We cannot but wonder about the ironic sting in the odd tangle of behaviors that gainsay Torah morality on the one hand, and the law of the kingdom on the other', says Schweid.[14] But these examples, provided in a routine fashion in the Megillah, without judgmental remarks by its author, can also serve different conclusions. In other words, in the open layer of the narrative the protagonists do not sense the contradictions emerging from their decisions and behavior.

Later in the discussion I seek to show that the duality that Goitein and Schweid mention regarding the plot's content and descriptive style can be supported by intertextual reading. The allusions scattered in the text enable the reader equipped with cultural-textual knowledge to discern two voices struggling with each other in the work.

13. Schweid, '*Hester hapanim hakaful*', pp. 128-29.
14. Schweid, '*Hester hapanim hakaful*', p. 130.

Intertextual Structuring

In accordance with my reading, the structuring is divided into two intertextual systems:

(a) Connects the Megillah with the story of Joseph; there are also two satellite stories belonging to this system: that of Saul's war against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15), and the stories of Jacob and Esau that add to and intensify 'the Joseph Complex', that is, the masculine model.

(b) The second links the story of the Megillah to the triple wife-sister story (in which the Patriarch hands over his wife to a foreign king), that is, the feminine model.

Each of these two systems embeds contrasting intentions in the text. Activation of the 'Joseph Complex', the masculine complex, creates emotional and ideological identification with the behavior of Mordecai, the Megillah's Jewish protagonist, and exalts his proud, uncompromising stance: 'But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence'; on the other hand, the embedding of the Patriarchs' story, the feminine complex, in the meta-text apparently serves to establish in the reader's mind a critical stance both with regard to Mordecai who hands over his ward to a foreign king, and also to the foreign values that the Megillah 'preaches' as almost self-evident. Both models, masculine and feminine, are therefore in confrontation in the Megillah. The masculine model seemingly triumphs in the exterior plot sphere, but its victory is placed into question by the rival, perhaps even subversive system embedded by the feminine model.

The Joseph Complex

The Story of Joseph

The Midrash (*Est. R.* 7 et seq.) has already noted the similarity between the story of Joseph and the Megillah, and it has also been discussed in various articles.[15] Following these researchers, I shall summarize the salient points of similarity:

15. See, for example, M. Gan, '*Megillat Esther be-aspaklariat korot Yosef be-mitzrayim*' (The Book of Esther in Light of the Joseph Narrative), *Tarbiz* 31 (1961), pp. 144-49; Cohen, *Megillat Esther*, pp. 12-14.

(a) The plot location in both stories is a foreign land—Egypt and Persia, respectively.
(b) In both stories the Jewish protagonist or protagonists assume a high position in the foreign kingdom. Their position helps them to save their family or people at a time of existential distress, and in so doing aid the foreign king who is also saved from great danger (the famine in Egypt, and saving King Ahasuerus from the plotters' designs).
(c) Joseph and Esther are both noted for their beauty and wisdom. These attributes influence their rise to greatness in the foreign court.
(d) In both stories the good deed is forgotten: Joseph's interpretation of the royal butler's and baker's dreams, and Mordecai saving Ahasuerus from the assassins. Forgotten things are remembered by means of sleep (Pharaoh) and sleeplessness (Ahasuerus).
(e) In both stories high office holders are sentenced to be hanged (the royal baker and Haman).

As the above-mentioned scholars have noted, the Megillah's author premeditatedly employs idioms from the story of Joseph in Egypt. A description of the practice of bringing in the corn in Egypt recurs in the description of gathering the virgins from among whom the future queen will be chosen: in Gen. 41.34-37 we read 'Let him appoint overseers for the land…and let them collect all the food of these good years… And the thing seemed good in Pharaoh's eyes', whereas in Est. 2.3-4 we read 'Let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins… And the thing pleased the king.' In Gen. 50.3 we find, 'And forty full days were taken for him, as such is the full time of embalming', and in Est. 2.12 we read 'for so were the days of their anointing accomplished'. The use of identical Hebrew for dealing with corn and the dead, as Cohen states, illustrates the impersonal attitude toward the woman to be chosen as queen.[16] In the Megillah the woman is treated as a soulless object. The Megillah's author uses identical language when he describes the test faced by Joseph and Mordecai. In Gen. 39.10 we read 'And so she spoke to Joseph day after day, and he would not listen to her', and in Est. 3.4, 'Now it came to pass, when they spoke daily to him, and he hearkened not unto them'. There is a long description in Gen. 41.42-43 of how Pharaoh treated Joseph when he elevated him to his high position: 'And

16. Cohen, *Megilat Esther*, p. 13.

Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand and had him clothed in fine linen clothes and placed the golden collar round his neck. And he had him ride in the chariot of his viceroy, and they called out before him *Abrekh*'.[17] All six Hebrew verbs that appear here recur in the description of Mordecai's rise to greatness (Est. 6.9; 7.2).[18]

The Megillah and Saul's War against the Amalekites

The Megillah's narrator hints to the reader that the plot and its protagonists possess a representative character. Haman 'the Agagite' and Mordecai 'the Jew' are two poles, two forces in battle. Following the midrash, Cohen identified another independent text used in the framework of the Megillah: the story of Saul's war against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15).[19] On the Saturday preceding Purim, the *Zakhor* Torah portion is read, and during the week of Purim all the Israel–Amalekite portions are read in the synagogue. On several occasions the narrator adds to the names of Mordecai and Haman representative relative pronouns: Mordecai 'the Jew' and Haman 'the Agagite'. Mordecai 'the son of Kish' (Est. 2.5) is presented as a direct descendant of Saul, who is also a son of Kish and of the tribe of Benjamin. Furthermore, Saul deviated from the ultimate commandment of destruction when he spared Agag the Amalekite, and both he and the people shared the spoils: 'But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them' (1 Sam. 15.9). Breaking the divine commandment led to the transfer of the monarchy from the House of Saul to the House of David; the author of the Megillah intentionally creates a 'corrective version' as the Megillah emphasizes three times that the Jews fighting their oppressors in the Megillah did not take the spoils of war, even though they were permitted to do so (Est. 9.10, 15, 16).[20]

17. According to Robert Alter, this is a relic of an Egyptian word that appears in the Hebrew text as 'make way'. See Alter, *Genesis*, p. 240.

18. See also Klara Buttig, 'Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story in the Fight Against Anti-Semitism and Sexism', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 239-48.

19. Cohen, *Megilat Esther*, p. 14.

20. In the mesorah text of the Megillah, Shlomo Bachar identifies sympathy for the House of Saul. This is almost the only text in the Bible that presents the House of Saul in a positive light. Bachar contends that the Megillah allows Saul's descendants to claim their right to the monarchy after Amalek's sin had been expiated. In his opinion the story was shaped tendentiously to allow the rehabilitation of the House of Saul, and consequently to provide a theological-legal basis for the House of Saul's future monarchy. In his opinion, the shaping of the story and of numerous details in it according to

Amalek as a Symbol

The source of 1 Samuel 15 is already based on a symbolic-representational concept that views Israel and the Amalekites as two confrontational ideological poles.[21] Saul is commanded to annihilate 'Amalek' many generations after they hounded the weak and tired people in the rearguard during their wandering in the desert. Samuel's religious edict to Saul before the war with the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15) is but an echo of the divine commandment in Deuteronomy that positions 'Amalek' as the opposite pole to 'God-fearing':

> Remember what Amalek did to thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee. When thou were faint and weary; and he feared not God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord thy God hath given rest

the Joseph story pattern reveals its source: a tradition that emerged from northern kingdom circles. See Shlomo Bachar, '*Giluyei ahada le-beit ha'av shel Shaul be-nusakh hamesorah shel megillat Esther*' (Signs of Sympathy for the House of Saul in the Mesorah Text of the Book of Esther), *Beit Mikra* 48 (2003), pp. 42-53. A similar conclusion is reached by Jonah Schellekens, whose study is based on type-scene analysis. Schellekens indicates similarity between the story of Mordecai's rise to greatness and his appointment as the king's deputy as a parallel to the story of Joseph in Egypt. In its narrative elements Mordecai's rise to power is similar to that of leaders such as Moses, David, and Joash. In his opinion, too, there is a basis for the assumption that Mordecai's lineage, which is greatly emphasized in the Megillah, hints at an attempt to offer a renewed leadership to the Jews in exile, a king from the Saul dynasty, not that of David. He draws attention to the name 'Shimei' that appears in the list of Mordecai's ancestors. One of them was Shimei whose name is identical to that of the man who cursed David as 'thou bloody man'. In Schellekens' opinion, with the exile came the opportunity of reopening the debate on the leadership of exiled Jewry between the House of David and the Saul dynasty; see Schellekens, 'Accession and Holidays'. Further discussion in this spirit can be found in Yitzhak Berger's study. Berger also exposes the Benjaminite trend in the Megillah. Unlike Bachar, he seeks to prove, by means of different analogies, that Esther, who was also a Benjaminite, is the candidate for the monarchy, and it is she who is shaped by the author as a corrective version of Saul, not Mordecai: Yitzhak Berger, 'Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner Biblical Allusion', *JBL* 129 (2010), pp. 625-44. Another researcher, Elsie Stern, attempts to establish a different, even opposite hypothesis. She relies on the satirical character of the Megillah, and contends that it was written in the Land of Israel in either the Hellenistic or Persian Periods by a Judaic school, and is aimed at advancing a national Land of Israel thesis that satirically criticizes the Diaspora; see Elsie R. Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', *JQR* 100 (2010), pp. 25-53.

21. A. Sagi, '*Onsho shel Amalek: darkei hahitmodedut shel ha-masoret ha-yehudit im haba'aya hamusarit uma'amada shel hamusariut ba-masoret hayehudit*' (The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem), in *Rav-tarbutiut bemedina demokratit ve yehudit* (Multiculturalism in a Democratic and Jewish State) (ed. M. Mautner, A. Sagi, and R. Shamir; Tel Aviv: Ramot, 1998), pp. 123-42.

> from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it' (Deut. 25.17-19).

Saul's war against Amalek is therefore not presented as one that establishes the borders of the land of the people of Israel like the war against the Philistines or the other neighboring peoples. It was a religious-spiritual war between those who feared God and the 'others'.

Over the generations the perception of Amalek as a symbol of otherness took firm hold. Following Avi Sagi's discussion, among the earlier and later commentators we can identify two versions of symbolic interpretation, one ideational and the other metaphysical. The ideational trend splits into two: (1) a struggle between belief in God and belief in the laws of nature; and (2), a struggle between notions of morality and justice, and belligerence and militarism. According to this interpretation, the historical struggle against Amalek is only one of the representations of a spiritual struggle that has gone on between the Hebrew/Jewish pole and 'the other' one since the dawn of history.[22]

As mentioned above, the perception of Amalek as a symbol is manifested in the story of Saul and his war against Amalek. Imposed on Saul and the people of Israel is the commandment to wipe out Amalek (the Hebrew *lehakhrim* is also taken from the religious semantic field). The location of the encounter between Samuel and Saul after the latter had not observed the divine commandment by sparing Agag and allowing the people to take spoils, was Gilgal, the holy site of the tribes of Israel prior to their entry into Canaan, and where the covenant between the people and their god was reaffirmed.[23] The biblical narrator judges Saul's and the people's disobeying the order to destroy Amalek very harshly. According to him, Saul missed the chance to tip the scales in the metaphysical, meta-historical struggle. Saul, the first king, and the people he led, failed in dealing with the 'other side' and left the consequences of that failure for future generations.

22. The metaphysical version, which is beyond the scope of the present study, is mainly based on *The Zohar*, which views the war between Israel and Amalek as the embodiment of the metaphysical struggles in the heavenly world between the holy *sephirot* and the forces of defilement. See Sagi, '*Onsho shel Amalek*', pp. 486-88.

23. See the extensive discussion of 1 Sam. 15 in M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

By means of the intertextual connection the Megillah further strengthens the symbolic density of the Amalek signifier. The Megillah therefore does not purport to relate the historical-personal story of Mordecai the man and Esther the woman in Ahasuerus's kingdom. The characters become representative: 'Amalek' rises up against the Jews in every generation, and in every generation 'the Jew' rises to face him. 'Amalek' becomes the signifier of the ultimate other, as opposed to the God-fearing 'Jew'. In the intertextual context being constructed in this discussion, the 'Amalek' signifier is the increasing power of the foreign world with which Mordecai and Esther, the representatives of Judaism, have to deal.

Jacob–Esau and Benjamin

The 'rectification' of Saul's symbolic and metaphysical failure in the war against the Amalekites is alluded to in the Megillah through another intertextual signifier, an allusion connected with the story of the struggle between Jacob and Esau. 'Amalek' is not the only signifier of the 'other' in the Bible. The ancient allegorical commentary identifies the 'other' in Esau. Esau (or Edom, and later Christianity according to the allegorical interpretation) is a brother-enemy whose birthright is premeditatedly taken from him and given to his younger brother, who is designated for the divine mission.

The biblical author in Genesis (who is not yet biased by allegorical interpretation) is well aware of the injustice inflicted on Esau by his brother. Jacob pays a high price for the theft of the blessing. Exchanging the sisters Rachel and Leah on the wedding night, the younger for the elder, is perceived by the narrator as a punishment, an eye for an eye, for the episode of the disguise and theft of the blessing destined for the elder brother by the younger one.[24] Jacob lives in exile for more than twenty years; he spent fourteen years laboring for his two wives, and another seven years until Joseph is born. Only then does he dare to go back to his home and family in Canaan. In the description of the renewed encounter between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33, the narrator repeatedly stresses Jacob's conciliatory and submissive gestures. He prostrates himself seven times before approaching Esau; the handmaidens and their children prostrate themselves; Leah and her children prostrate themselves, and finally Joseph and Rachel follow suit. The only son who does not participate in the 'prostration ceremony' is the unborn Benjamin. The later allegorical interpretation, signs of which are already clearly evident in

24. See Leibowitz, *Iyyunim be-sefer bereishit*, pp. 221-25.

the Megillah, made symbolic use of this fact: Mordecai, too, is a 'Benjaminite' who does not bow or prostrate himself before the other, Gentile side.[25]

To sum up: Haman 'the Agagite' and Mordecai 'the Jew' are two confrontational poles. The stubborn refusal of Mordecai, of the Benjaminite line, to bow to Haman is an expression of Jewish pride that does not abase itself before the 'other'. The first intertextual system forms a genealogical (and also analogical) connection between 'Joseph the Righteous', his brother Benjamin, both of whom are Rachel's sons, and Mordecai the Jew. The Hebrew and Jewish mission of the two protagonists, even when they are acting in the foreign world and enjoying its benefits, is to constitute an antithesis of the 'other' and adopt a proud stance for their principles, even when risking their lives.

The Second System: The 'You Are my Sister' Model

The second intertextual system employs the triple story of the Patriarchs within the Megillah's meta-text. Yair Zakovitch, who in his book addresses the connections between the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt and the story of the Megillah, enumerates several points of similarity between them:[26]

(a) In both stories there is a Hebrew/Jewish man who has gone into exile.
(b) The man has a beautiful wife/relative.
(c) As in the story of the Patriarchs, the man asks the woman to enter the king's court while concealing her true identity, in order to save her husband or her endangered people: 'Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred, for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it' (Est. 2.10) and she does so, and later, too, acts in accordance with the instructions of Mordecai, her guardian, even when his instructions are liable to endanger her life (Est. 4), just as Sarah did Abraham's bidding to 'Say you are my sister'.
(d) The woman is taken into King Ahasuerus's harem, just as Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's or that of the king of Gerar.

25. See also Y. Bachrach, *Kitvuni Le-dorot: le-hora'at megillat Esther al pi hamekorot* (Teaching the Book of Esther according to the Sources) (Jerusalem: Shapira Center, 1974), p. 68.

26. Zakovitch, 'Through the Looking Glass'.

(e) The king eventually learns of the relationship between the man and the woman, as he did in the case of Sarah in Egypt and Gerar.
(f) Those who sought to harm the Hebrew/Jew and his family are afflicted. In the triple story, too, God afflicted Pharaoh and Abimelech because of Sarah.

Zakovitch contends that the similarities are not random since the Megillah relates the story of an exile, and the plot of the first exile is in the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt. The changes introduced into the plot by the Megillah's author, Zakovitch adds, attest to the fact that the author adapts his objective to the limitations of life in exile: Esther, who is unmarried (according to the literal meaning of the Megillah's story), can marry the foreign king and thus attain the highest post in the kingdom that a woman is able to reach. Furthermore, the Megillah contains no yearnings for return to the homeland. Influence in the royal court is therefore the heart's desire of the Jew living in exile.[27]

The Midrash: The Refusal to Bow—A Gesture of Pride or an Unnecessary Risk?

Mordecai's obdurate refusal to bow to Haman is apparently perceived, according to the midrash, as an obstinate gesture that placed an entire community in existential danger:

> The highest officials, even the most exalted judges, showed Haman the reverence bidden by the king. The Jews themselves entreated Mordecai not to call forth the fury of Haman, and cause the ruin of Israel thereby. Mordecai, however, remained steadfast; no persuasions could move him to pay to a mortal the tribute due to Divinity (*2 Panim Aherim* 66).[28]

In other words, in the eyes of his people, and of rabbis and religious arbiters, Mordecai's prideful stance was liable to exact a very high price: the entire community was in danger of death as a result of his behavior. And indeed, the entire Jewish community of Persia suffered because of Mordecai's obstinate refusal to make this gesture: 'But it seemed contemptible in his eyes to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had made known to him the people of Mordecai; wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews…' The names of Mordecai (Marduk) the courtier, and that of his ward, Hadassah-Esther (Ashtar), attest to the process of

27. Zakovitch, 'Through the Looking Glass', p. 66.
28. See also Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*. IV. *From Joshua to Esther* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 395.

assimilation into the foreign culture. Mordecai suggests to Esther, his ward, that she should not reveal her religion in the royal palace. For his part, Judaism is something that should be concealed and possibly even be ashamed of. And then he displays an odd stubbornness toward one of the ceremonial customs of the royal court, stubbornness he certainly did not display to King Ahasuerus in whose court he served.

To provide a more well-grounded reason for Mordecai's obduracy (where the biblical story does not explain it) some of the midrashim say that Haman wove an image of an idol on his clothes so that anyone who bowed to him was worshipping that idol (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*; *Panim Aherim* 46; etc.). It seems to me that the midrash highlights the covert criticism. It does not seem to exegete that Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman has sufficiently strong justification to imperil all the Jews living in the Persian dispersion, who were at the mercy of their hosts. The religious-ritual reason is added to the original story to 'justify' Mordecai's refusal to bow as a worthy ideological cause, not a casual whim that is incomprehensible against the backdrop of everyday life in the royal court, and against the backdrop of life in the diaspora that had apparently become an everyday experience.

Mordecai and Esther—Husband and Wife

Exegetes who are fully aware of the connection between the story of the Megillah and the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt, and also the Joseph stories, repeatedly mention 'echoes' of these stories by means of inter-midrashic allusions: midrashim on the Megillah create intertextual connections with midrashim on Abraham and Sarah in Egypt. This, if you wish, is a 'double' intertextuality in which inter-midrashic correspondence on biblical texts hold a covert discourse between themselves (and perhaps this is what Boyarin meant when he described midrashic intertextuality as 'baroque'). Readers of these midrashim can identify between the lines a hint of criticism leveled at Mordecai, similar to the criticism aimed at Abraham when he went down to Egypt. This hidden criticism is directed against the schizophrenic situation typical of exile stories: assimilation and acceptance of the foreign territory's values on the one hand, and a feeble attempt at defending Jewish independence on the other. The intertextual discourse between the midrash and the triple story addresses the relationship between Mordecai and Esther. The biblical text presents Esther as a single woman, that is, it offers a 'corrective' version of the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt: the Megillah does not present the problematic relationship between the Jewish woman and the foreign king as breaking the moral-sexual taboo. Here the midrashic

sages link Esther and Mordecai not only as guardian and ward, but in marriage (again, marriage to a niece). These midrashim create a complete parallel with the story of Abraham and Sarah, and also an analogical closeness to the 'You are my sister' pattern, while relating that Mordecai loves Esther and his soul is bound to hers, for not only was he her guardian, father, and mother, but they were also husband and wife, for when she was of age she married him in accordance with Jewish law.[29] Tractate *Megillah* describes their relationship as follows:

> And when her father and mother had died, Mordecai took her as his daughter. A Tanna taught in the name of R. Meir: Do not read: 'as his daughter' but rather 'as his home', i.e., his wife. For Mordecai in fact married Esther (*Meg.* 1a).

Describing Mordecai and Esther as man and wife exposes the man to criticism. The man who was responsible for Hadassah/Esther and her personal safety, either as her guardian or in marital relations, neither upheld his human commitment to her nor prevented the danger awaiting her. According to the midrash, Esther's entry into Ahasuerus's house is the same as Sarah's into the house of Pharaoh or Abimelech, with all its attendant ethical problems, which were possibly even exacerbated, for the king sought only young virgins and Esther's marriage to Mordecai could have rescued her from Ahasuerus's 'meat market'.

Study of the midrashic texts should guide the reader not only to the contents of the biblical story, but also to what is missing from it. As in the case of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt, in the case of Mordecai and Esther, too, the exegetes highlight Mordecai's seeming efforts to hide Esther from the officers seeking virgins (a sort of variation on the story of Abraham hiding Sarah in a chest), until his fears for her life forced him to bring her out of hiding. The various midrashim fill the gaps with different variations which, however, are close to one another:

> During those four years Esther hid herself and was not seen by anyone. But everyone knew that Esther was the most beautiful woman in the world, and so all the maidens the eunuchs brought before the king were dismissed by him for they did not find favor in his eyes. Accordingly the king decreed that any maiden who hid from the king's officers would be put to death. Now Mordecai began to fear for Esther, saying: How can I take the life of this poor orphan into my hands? He took her out of hiding and she was seen by the king's officers and taken to the king's palace (*Panim Aherim*, 2nd version, 63-64; *Agadat Esther* 20-21; *Second Targum of Esther* 2.5).

29. *Meg.* 13a; see also the Septuagint translation of Est. 2.7, and Bachrach, *Kitvuni Le-dorot*, pp. 43.

Thus, for example, the author of the midrash, the Second Targum of Esther, describe Mordecai's hiding of Esther:

> Now when the words of the king were made public as well as his decree, and when many young girls were gathered to the fortress of Susa, to the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch (and) keeper of the women, so when Mordecai heard that virgins were being sought, he took and hid Esther from the officers of King Xerxes, who went out to seek the virgins so that they should not come and lead her away. He enclosed one room within another room so that the messengers of the king should not see her.

This filling of the missing gap contains more than a hint of criticism of the biblical Mordecai, about whom the Megillah does not relate that he did everything in his power to protect his ward from the king's officers, and that perhaps her entry into the king's harem was not enforced, but intentional.

As we have shown above, the author of the midrash (*Meg.* 13a) formed the connection between the Abraham stories and that of Mordecai and Esther by linking the latter two in marriage. This creative possibility, which reinforces the analogy between the Megillah's text and the story of Abraham and Sarah, gave rise to new moral and ethical problems among the later midrashic sages, such as the possibility that as a married woman Esther had forbidden sexual relations with Ahasuerus. Therefore a later midrashic source defends Esther's honor by assuring the reader that there was no such adulterous relationship:

> The righteous Esther was ready to martyr herself and be killed if only not to lay with that evildoer, but she did not have to for a miracle happened to her and Shaddith (female demon) dressed in her likeness and lay with Ahasuerus, and he imagined she was Esther (*Zohar* 276a; *Tikkunei Zohar*, tikkun 20)

Ginzberg notes that ancient sources do not concur with this. They hold that Darius I was Esther's son by Ahasuerus (*Sanh.* 74a).[30]

The issue of the transgression committed by a married woman who has sexual relations with another man is also raised in another source in which the author of Second Targum of Esther sheds new light on Esther's refusal to go to the king on her own initiative:

> I have been praying for thirty days that the king should not ask for me and thus not cause me to sin; for when I was reared by you, you used (to tell) me that every woman that has been captured of the daughters of Israel or of her own free will went to the gentiles has no inheritance portion among the tribes of Israel (*Targum Sheni* 4.1).

30. See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, IV, p. 460 n. 80.

The stand taken here by *Targum Sheni* concerning Esther's attempted restraint from having sexual intercourse with the king is a problem of serious concern in rabbinic literature. The Babylonian Talmud (*Sanh.* 74b) asks: 'But did not Esther transgress publicly?' To which Abaye replies: 'Esther was merely natural soil', that is to say, she was merely a passive participant in the act.

Hence it emerges that the earlier relations with Ahasuerus are presented by the exegete as rape, and thus from a Halakhic standpoint they enable the continuation of Esther's double 'marriage'. But if she goes to the king of her own volition, she will be forbidden to her Jewish husband and will be unable to go back to him.

Yet surprisingly, one of the more daring exegetes of Tractate *Megillah* adopts the opposite position. Not only does he not seek ways of obscuring embarrassing sexual and religious details emerging from living in the king's harem, but with great courage and in blunt language he highlights the bitter truth emerging from between the lines: Esther's adultery is not a one-time event, but an ongoing 'double marriage' with all its implications. Moreover, the vague situation described in the midrash is the result of Mordecai's express initiative and bidding:

> And the bidding of Mordecai Esther did. R. Yirmyah said: 'This teaches us that she used to show menstrual blood to the Sages to determine if she was a *niddah* just as she was when she was raised with him'. R. Bar-Lima (in the name of Rav): 'This indicates that she used to rise from the bosom of Ahasuerus and immerse herself and sit in the bosom of Mordecai' (*Meg.* 13.2).

Furthermore, the Jerusalem Talmud describes the sexual relations between Esther and Ahasuerus as erotic relations of the more gratifying type: 'Why is Esther likened to a gazelle? It is because the womb of the gazelle is narrow and constantly attractive for its mate as it was on the first time, thus Esther was constantly loved by Ahasuerus as she was the first time' (*y. Yoma* 83).

At the symbolic-metaphorical level of reading these midrashim apparently refer to the exile situation described in the *Megillah* as one of continuous 'adultery' in which the woman has relations both with her legitimate husband and the other man: she 'used to rise from the bosom of Ahasuerus and immerse herself and sit in the bosom of Mordecai…' Readers of this midrash who were shocked by the religious meanings emerging from the description[31] ccould find appropriate justification by

31. See also Barry Walfish, 'Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai–Esther–Ahasuerus Triangle in Talmudic, Medieval and Sixteenth-Century Exegesis', in White Crawford and Greenspoon (eds.), *The Book of Esther*, pp. 111-36.

reading it on the metaphorical, not the 'documentary', level. An interesting observation in this direction, which identifies sociopolitical situations in the story's figurative language, can be found in Mary E. Mill's article on the diasporic novella:

> The reader is invited to examine the manner in which the macro-political context is explored via the narrative structures of plot, characterization, and setting of these stories. I suggest that the treatment of the micro-body of a main character carries with it contextualization of a wider social body of the community within an imperialistic culture. The genre of the diasporic novella as found in the stories of Esther and Daniel deals with border crossing, where the border to be crossed is that between host and home community and between insider and outsider status. The implied reader of diasporic novellas is interested in how a person can maintain two identities and how that process provides either safety or danger for the common social study.[32]

It therefore seems that in its own figurative way ('she used to rise from the bosom of Ahasuerus and immerse herself and sit in the bosom of Mordecai…') the bold midrash in Tractate Megillah fully describes the dualistic situation of diasporic life.

Summary: The Masculine, Feminine, and Integrative Models

At this stage we can attempt to define the difference between the masculine and feminine models as follows. When Jewishness is 'feminine', its stance toward the foreigner is passive and submissive: the feminine side is consigned to 'the foreigner' and is abandoned to its fate in the king's harem; the woman's reaction to her situation is not conveyed—at every stage of the story her personality, wishes, and rights are erased. When the Jewishness is 'masculine', the man's stance against the foreign world is presented as a proud one: 'Joseph the Righteous' passes the test, he fights for his principles, and is prepared to pay the price expected of anyone who dares to rebel against the power of the host-ruler ('and how could I do this great evil and give offense to God?' [Gen. 39.9]).

In the three Patriarchs' stories Jewishness is represented by a couple, and this is also the situation in the Megillah. Hebrewness/Jewishness representation by a couple, as it appears in the Patriarchs' stories and also in the Megillah, enables the narrator to describe the 'schizophrenic' situation in exile: the 'feminine' side is consigned to the shame of life in

32. Mary E. Mills, 'Household and Table: Diasporic Boundaries in Daniel and Esther', *CBQ* 68 (2006), pp. 408-20.

the foreign king's harem, whereas the 'masculine' side continues to live its life in the world outside the harem in accordance with his Jewish values. Mordecai, who is a Benjaminite and thus of Joseph's lineage, does not kneel or bow before Haman, but his niece Esther (who is perhaps also his wife) is consigned to the harem of a king known for his lascivious proclivities. This schizophrenic situation can be found in the midrash describing Sarah's feelings in the harem:

> And that entire night Sarah lay prostrate in prayer, saying, 'Lord of the Ages, Abraham went forth on account of trust, and I went forth in good faith. Abraham is outside of prison, so should I be put in prison?' (*Gen. R.*, *Parasha* 41.2).

Sarah demands satisfaction from God. In her view as manifested in this midrash, both she and Abraham swear allegiance to the same covenant. As far as she is concerned there is absolutely no justification in her losing her freedom because of her faith, whereas Abraham is out of prison. This split personality facilitates life in duality: one side continues to proudly raise the banner of discrete Jewish independence, whereas the other is consigned to the ruler's arbitrariness and is compelled to adapt itself the manipulative world of harem intrigue. On the externalized level, national honor is seemingly preserved; on the covert level, the anima pays the price. The schizophrenic pattern necessarily leads to either hypocrisy or illness. When the gaps created between religious-national norms and the compromises required from life under subjection are too wide, the only alternative facing the Jew is to live, at least with one part of his being, a life of repression.

5

'The Lady and the Peddler': Shai Agnon Follows the Biblical Narrative

The recurring narrative under discussion, that is, the danger lurking for the Jew who finds himself in foreign territory, which leads to a dangerous erotic relationship with the host, is retold in the modern fantasy by Nobel Prize for Literature laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon (known by the Hebrew acronym of his forenames as 'Shai' Agnon). 'The Lady and the Peddler', Agnon's horror story about a female cannibal who feeds on the flesh of her husbands was first published in 1943 as part of an anthology entitled *Basa'ar* (Days of Storm), which was prepared for the soldiers of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) who volunteered to fight with the Allies in World War II.[1] Agnon researcher Dan Laor tends to accept the view of those commentators that see the story as an allegorical work in which the peddler represents the homeless Eternal Jew wandering from place to place, whereas the Lady Helen who wants to kill him and drink his blood, represents Nazi Germany. Robert Alter expands the allegoric definition even further, whereby the lady is 'the eternally hostile Gentile host'.[2]

This position, which views the story's male and female protagonists as cultural-national representations, can be based not only on the historical social context of World War II and the systematic annihilation of the Jewish people, but also on the intertextual relationship created by the story with other antecedent texts. At least three additional stories can be found in Agnon's story: the tale of 'Hansel and Gretel' from *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39), and the

1. Dan Laor, *Shai Agnon: Hebetim hadashim* (Shai Agnon: New Perspectives) (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1995), p. 72.

2. Robert Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature* (ed. with introduction and notes; New York: Behrman House, 1975), pp. 197-98 Quotations from 'The Lady and the Peddler' are from Alter's translation, pp. 199-212.

story of Samson and Delilah (Judg. 16). The Brothers Grimm folktale connects Agnon's story with the Gothic-Germanic repertoire; the connection with the story of Joseph creates a further dialogical link in the ongoing cultural tradition (the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife as the archetype of Jewish–Gentile relations);[3] as in the Bible, the story of Samson and Delilah is present in the Agnon text as a mirror story of the 'Joseph' text.[4] The reading I propose will first focus on a literary study in general. In the second part of the interpretation I shall address the biblical allusions that Agnon inserted into his story, and the significance of the intertextual dialogue.

The Story's Plot

The plot unfolds in the Diaspora. One day, a Jewish peddler who plies his trade in towns and villages comes to a remote forest where stands a solitary house in which a lady lives. Of all the wares he offers her—sheets and soaps and various cosmetics—the lady chooses a hunting knife. After closing the sale the peddler goes on his way, but he loses his way in the dark and stormy night. He wanders in circles until he finds himself back at the lady's house. He asks her for shelter until the moon comes out to light his way. She consents, 'with an angry eye', and lets him stay in an old cowshed for one night. Next morning it is raining even harder, so he asks to stay and pay for his lodging with odd jobs he does around the house. The temporary shelter gradually becomes permanent, at first until the rain stops, and then for an unlimited period. From the old cowshed the peddler moves into a room containing old, 'out of use' tools, until he eventually moves into the lady's bed. From that moment she plies him with food and drink so that when the time is ripe he will become fine prey for her cannibalistic passion.

The ambivalent relations between the Jewish man and the Gentile woman presents a series of unresolved questions. In the sociopolitical context in which the story is told there is almost no real possibility of a lasting erotic relationship between a poor Jewish peddler and a Gentile

3. Identification of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife as an antecedent text of the Agnon story has been revealed by numerous writers. See, for example, Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al sippurei Agnon* (Essays on Agnon's Stories) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962); Yaacov Bahat, *Shai Agnon ve-Haim Hazaz* (Shai Agnon and Haim Hazaz) (Haifa: Yovel, 1962); Hillel Barzel, *Beyn Agnon le-Kafka* (Agnon and Kafka: A Comparative Study) (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1972), etc.

4. Zakovitch, 'Through the Looking Glass', pp. 78-79.

lady. Except for one sentence referring to 'the people of the place', the action takes place in a social vacuum. In any situation resembling reality, a 'couple' such as this would encounter insurmountable barriers, and would have to overcome numerous inhibitions. Only in an isolated house deep in a forest can the two protagonists embark on an erotic relationship without being ostracized by those around them. Furthermore, the secret of their relationship is unclear. The lady's attitude toward the peddler ranges between attraction and repulsion. Sometimes one pole gains the upper hand, but mainly it is the other. The Jewish peddler, too, does not behave like a man in love. His emotional state is not revealed and it seems that the feelings emerging from his words and behavior attest to embarrassment and unease more than love or passion. We do not understand why the peddler remains in the lady's house and how he does not sense the signs of imminent danger. As the story unfolds there are increasing signs that the couple's hold on one another resembles those neurotic situations in which torturer and tortured, victim and executioner, are bound together by an unbreakable bond, with each in turn feeding the other's sick needs.

The Consciousness of Protagonist and Reader

Bilha Rubinstein contends that the narrator's ironic attitude toward his protagonist, whom he presents as naïve and slow-witted, seemingly renders the reader as the narrator's co-conspirator. The reader, who unlike the peddler is not naïve, has the sense of having an advantage over him, but in Rubinstein's opinion the advantage is false since the reader, too, possesses insufficient knowledge of how to solve the riddle until its final stages. 'If he [the reader] were in the protagonist's place', Rubinstein claims, 'it is doubtful if he would be able to successfully deal with the enigma'.[5] This conclusion does not fall into line with Agnon's efforts to scatter well-placed clues throughout the story. These hints mandate that he formulate his position on the lady's nature in the early stages of the story, and even gauge and judge the peddler's behavior whose blindness to the danger lurking rouses increasing unease in the reader:

The plot's setting is based on familiar details taken from the Gothic horror story repertoire. The peddler leaves '*hayishuv*' (habitation) and finds himself in a solitary house in the heart of the forest. Inside the

5. Bilha Rubinstein, *Yesodot fantastiyim be-siporet* (Fantastic Elements in Fiction), (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1989), p. 165.

mysterious house, where in folktales the witch usually lives, the demonic woman lies in wait for her prey. The Hebrew expression '*sdeh ya'ar*' (forest field) is a sort of cultural hybrid that conjoins the Gothic forest with '*hasadeh*' (the field), which in Hebrew culture is 'the dark place': Cain murdered Abel in the field, and the girl who cannot be saved even if she screams for help, is raped in the field. '*Sdeh ya'ar*' stands in stark contrast to '*hayishuv*'. The *yishuv* is where the human norms guiding the civilized person are upheld, whereas the *sadeh* and the *ya'ar* (forest) are no-man's-land; of all the peddler's wares the woman chooses a hunting knife; darkness falls and the protagonist wanders in circles until he comes back to the light gleaming in the window of the solitary house. This element, too, is familiar to every reader of fairytales and folktales: it is the dark force of the enchanted circle that attracts the lost protagonists, drawing them to their death. Hanging on the walls of the lady's house are many animal horns, and as the rain goes on falling 'the animals' horns on the walls were enveloped in mist and they gave off an odor of living flesh'.[6] When the peddler asks the lady what became of her late husband, she replies, 'What difference does it make to you how he was killed, whether an evil beast ate him or whether he was slaughtered with a knife? Don't you yourself sell knives with which it is possible to slaughter a man?'[7] Immediately afterward it emerges that not only one husband had come to an unexpected end, but many. Every now and then the woman releases a very direct scrap of information on the fate of her husbands, and she even hints that they might have ended their life in her belly. I have absolutely no doubt that readers cannot but follow these clues, and at the early stages of their reading consolidate their knowledge of the lady's nature.

Moreover, it seems to me that we must question Rubinstein's assertion regarding the peddler's slow-wittedness. He has a variety of talents that help him find his way to the lady's house and into her bed: he repairs her leaky roof and afterward does various odd jobs around the house; he knows how to hold a lively conversation with the lady of the house and even tell her 'the sort of things that the ear of a young woman loves to hear'. Even when the narrator terms the peddler 'naïve' and 'simple' it seems that he himself is surprised by his protagonist's resourcefulness in his complex coping with the delicate situation in which he is forced to act.

6. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 203.
7. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 204.

In my opinion the protagonist's 'blindness' should be explained in a way that is not dependent on his character traits, but on the existential situation in which he is captive. The story of the strange death of the previous husband (and of several others) is gradually revealed to him from the outset. But he decides to interpret it 'for his own favor and pleasure': 'The lady looked at him and smiled a queer smile, perhaps in contempt or perhaps in gratification, or perhaps just an ordinary smile that one person smiles to another and the other interprets as he wishes: if he is a naïve man, he interprets it in his own favor'.[8] And when the lady tells him explicitly, 'I drink men's blood and I eat human flesh'[9] as she hugs and kisses him with all her might, he thinks to himself, 'This is the kind of poetic language that noblewomen must use when they address their husbands with affection'.[10] The protagonist's decision to repress the warning sounds and interpret the menacing reality 'for his own favor' continues even when he discovers that she does not taste the dishes she cooks for him, and when she does not answer his questions about the fate of her husbands. He remains silent since 'I want for nothing'. The Jewish peddler compares his situation as a lone, penniless man with his present situation, the vague danger hinted at by the lady and other dangers that he perhaps faced in his years on the road, and decides to stay. It therefore appears that from the outset the peddler represses—almost by force—the terrible truth that is revealed to him, so he can allow himself the false warmth of the refuge the lady affords him. The longing of the homeless person for a sort of 'home' is so powerful that it nullifies all the other voices and causes a 'coma'. According to his experience, the choice he faces is not between a quiet, risk-free life and the 'life on the edge' he is living in the lady's house.

The Aconscious Layers of the Collective Subject

According to my interpretation, the story's atmosphere of horror and the protagonist's repression mechanism are closely linked to the system of feelings that Freud terms '*unheimlich*' (uncanny), the kind of anxiety that is actually based on the familiar, on what we have experienced in the past. The word's etymology leads Freud to an interesting distinction: '*heimlich*' is a word that can merge into its opposite meaning: the sense of fear of the uncanny actually arises from the familiar, comfortable home, and it eventually turns '*heimlich*' into '*unheimlich*'.

8. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 204.
9. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 206.
10. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 206.

Freud enriches the etymological search with a series of examples of which the 'uncanny' can be experienced, such as fear of death and castration. The other examples he provides are perhaps less familiar, but they make an interesting contribution to our discussion. Among other things, Freud mentions the mechanical doll in E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (which became the doll Olympia in the opera 'The Tales of Hoffmann'), the double phenomenon, and 'the haunted house'.[11] The mechanical doll ostensibly has a soul, the inanimate and mechanical bears a too strong resemblance to the living, and the rapid shift between the 'living' creature and the inanimate mechanical one evokes a sense of fear; we experience the same feeling about the double. The double can give the impression that two different people are identical. It is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. All this evokes ambivalent feelings that Freud links to the sense of *unheimlich*.

In Agnon's story, too, the protagonist's sense of fear is connected with the lady's transformation from a flesh and blood woman, with whom the peddler has an intimate erotic relationship, to a terrifying being that feeds on its husbands' flesh. The closeness of the two beings, the human figure's ability to transform into a vampire, arouse in both the male protagonist and us, the readers, the feeling of *unheimlich*.

In all the examples provided by Freud (of which only a few are mentioned here) the feeling of *unheimlich* causes the person experiencing it to withdraw to the previous stages in the history of the development of the self, and what troubled him in the past and which he has overcome reemerges as a vision of terror. Hence, Freud contends, we must infer that *unheimlich* dwells in the subconscious. Reemerging from within our own 'home' are the protean forces that now face us in the form of demonic creatures. Repression becomes fear that repeatedly resurfaces and is revealed. Unheimlich is therefore something different, Freud says, but something long familiar to the psyche. A person vaguely feels that these monstrous creatures that repression distanced from him, are still present in the hidden recesses of his personality.

11. In these examples Freud refers to two studies that preceded his own: the mechanical doll was addressed in Ernst Jentsch's study, and the double phenomenon was described by Freud's student, Otto Rank.

Of particular importance in our case is another of Freud's examples, '*Das unheimliche Haus*', or what is known in various languages as 'a haunted house', a house inhabited by ghosts from the past. In this case the feeling of *heimlich–unheimlich* is figuratively described as a real 'house'. The lady's house is from now on a figurative image ('*unheimlich Haus*') as well as a menacing reality from within which ghosts of the past emerge to take control of the house's dwellers in the present.

The Imaginary Home

Following Freud's explanation, I embarked on a search for the home motif in Agnon's story. The concept of house or home is, of course, one of the most important elements in the exiled Jew's world. The word 'house' or 'home' (Hebrew has only one word for both) appears on twenty occasions in Agnon's story. In most cases the narrator uses it without a possessive pronoun. The 'house', 'a house' or 'that house' form recurs thirteen times; the phrase 'hunting house' appears once, and later in the same sentence the phrase 'their houses' (of hunters) also appears; on three occasions the house is defined as the lady's house, and she herself is termed 'the house's owner'. But surprisingly, the house is defined—only once in the whole story—as the peddler's house (or home) too.

Let us examine this scene: toward the end of the story the peddler's sense of impending danger is heightened. As usual, the lady of the house serves him the meal she has cooked for him, but this time he cannot ignore the smell of hunger coming from her mouth. When he suggests that she at least have a slice of bread, she replies with an odd smile, harder than before, 'Don't worry about me, I won't go hungry'. Before going to bed the peddler prepares to recite the *Shema* (Hear, O Israel) prayer. Because of the crucifixion icon on the wall, which thus far had not troubled him, he decides to recite the prayer outside. This is the critical moment at which the cannibalistic woman's hunger reaches its peak. From the ending of the story we know that had he remained in the house he would surely have been murdered. The sudden need to recite the *Shema* prayer away from the icon causes Joseph the Peddler to go out of the house. He goes outside into the snow-covered winter world. The sky is gray and overcast, without a single ray of light. The Jewish peddler 'Suddenly saw himself as though imprisoned in a forest in the midst of the snow around him that was covered over by new snow'.[12] For the first time in the story Joseph begs for God's mercy: ' "Father in heaven", Joseph shouted, "how far away I have gone! If I don't return at once, I am

12. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 211.

lost"'. How should we understand the cry, 'how far away I have gone'? Does he mean just a physical distance, or is this an admission of a different kind of distancing? Surprisingly or ironically, the heavenly response to his supplication helps him find the wind direction so he is able to find his way back to the house from which he had just fled:

> He directed himself toward the house and went back to it. A tranquil stillness prevailed. No sound could be heard except for a muffled sound like snow falling on piles of snow. And from that arose another sound of his feet sinking in the snow and struggling to get out. His shoulders grew heavy, as though he was carrying his heavy pack. After a while he reached the house.[13]

The English translation of the last sentence is inaccurate. Agnon writes '*Akharei sha'a ktana higia etzel beyto*' ('After a while he reached *his* house [home]'). Here the terrible distress engulfing the Jewish peddler is fully revealed. The only choice left to him is between bad and worse. The world outside the lady's house does not allow him to exist in it, for it is a frozen world of death. He is doomed to wander through the snow with his heavy pack on his back, the pack of his foreignness. In a world of snow he has the chance of an imagined temporary shelter, and with no other alternative it becomes his house and home. Or—and here I revert to the Freudian interpretive thread that guided me at the beginning of the discussion—the exiled Jew is in a situation of perpetual *unheimlich* that is ostensibly 'his home'. This is the shocking truth. The Jew is never in the warm situation of *heimlich*. On the changing axis between the safe experience of the familiar and pleasant described by Freud, and its stark contrast, lies the demonic and the terrifying, with the Jew almost always at the *unheimlich* pole. The demons that rise from within 'the house' are not even his, and not those that he must repress into his subconscious, but rather admit into his consciousness. Coma—paralysis of his consciousness—is the Jew's only defense. Had he not been able to repress consciousness he would have been incapable of existing for centuries in a state of constant terror. In other words, he would have been unable to survive.

Intertextual Connections

At this stage of the discussion we should examine Agnon's use of intertextual dialogue, and the role of the antecedent narratives in his renewed story.

13. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 211.

The Brothers Grimm's 'Hansel and Gretel' leads the reader to the dark Gothic repository of Germanic culture. In the forest stands the imaginary house that embodies the fantasy of hunger in all its force: the roof is tiled with chocolate, the windows are clear sugar, and the walls are made of cakes and gingerbread. The witch who lives in the house feeds Hansel—her first victim—to fatten him up. Gretel, who is left outside the cage, can plan their escape so long as she seemingly 'feeds' the witch's cannibalistic passion, until she has the opportunity of luring the witch into an act of self-destruction. Like the 'naïve' Joseph in Agnon's story, the two children who are ostensibly innocent victims display great resourcefulness in their existential battle, in both the first part of the story when they are abandoned by their parents, and in the second part when they escape the witch's clutches. The figure of the victim in the Brothers Grimm story is represented by a couple, a boy and a girl. The split situation creates the possibility of both survival and escape. While one half of the victim is caged, the other half can plan and execute their escape.[14]

In the Agnon story the tale of Hansel and Gretel serves at least three intertextual poetic functions:

(a) As a pre-plot clue whose role is to connect the lady to the fairytale witch, and hence to the danger motif.
(b) As a folktale from the Gothic-Germanic repository, a horror story about the cannibalistic cruelty of the hostess who plans to devour her guests, which links Agnon's story to the specific historical context, that is, Nazi Germany's brutal machine of annihilation directed against the Jewish people.
(c) As reinforcement and intensification of the imaginary home motif.

In 'The Lady and the Peddler' Agnon also forms intentional intertextual connections with the antecedent biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39). Only in the story's last pages it emerges that the Jewish peddler's name is Joseph. The woman in the story is called '*adonit*',

14. In his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), Bruno Bettelheim discusses splitting the protagonist into two. The split usually serves representation of different forces in the child's psyche, for example, the bestial and spiritual aspects, and in the case of Hansel and Gretel perhaps the independent and dependent aspects. At the end of folktales such as this, integration occurs between the forces in a vital process of growing up. It is worth mentioning in this context the split that takes place in the Patriarchs' stories and the book of Esther. According to my interpretation the split represents the schizophrenic situation in which the Hebrew/Jew finds himself in foreign territory.

'the Lady'. In the biblical story, which does not give Potiphar's wife's name, she is signified as '*eshet adonav*', 'his master's wife', that is, a 'lady'. Agnon's text incorporates allusions couched in biblical language that link his story to Genesis 39 in particular, and the Joseph stories in general: when referring to her dead husband, the woman asks, 'What difference does it make to you how he was killed, whether an evil beast ate him or whether he was slaughtered with a knife?'.[15] It reverts to Jacob's cry: 'It is my son's tunic. A vicious beast has devoured him. Joseph's been torn to shreds.' In the Agnon story, 'Every day she prepared him a feast from all that she had, in house and field. The lady did not allow him to labor, neither in the house nor in the field', whereas the biblical text says, 'the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake and the Lord's blessing was on all that he had in house and field' (Gen. 39.5). When the peddler's puzzlement grows because the lady neither eats nor drinks, he says, 'You do not eat with me at the table, and even away from the table I have not seen you eat or drink', which is a recurring echo of the biblical verse, 'And he left all that he had in Joseph's hands, and he gave no thought to anything with him there save the bread he ate' (Gen. 39.6). The Agnon story says, 'And everything she put in his hand, except for the bread which she did not eat at the same table with him'.[16]

The Agnon story builds the gradual rise of Joseph the Peddler in the lady's house ironically and in a pattern similar to the rise of Joseph in Potiphar's house. The biblical Joseph who was sold into slavery moves from the field into the house, becomes Potiphar's personal servant, and later is given responsibility, first over the house, then over all his master's property in house and field, and finally over everything he owned (except his wife); at first Agnon's peddler sleeps in the old cowshed, then in a storeroom full of old tools, and eventually in the lady's bedroom, in the bed formerly occupied by her late husbands.

The Bible hints at this, and the midrash expands: the biblical Joseph has to pay a certain price for his success in Potiphar's house. One by one the handsome slave who was taken from his father's house sheds the signs of Hebrew culture in order to adapt to his new environment as far as possible (see the discussion in Chapter 3). The peddler, too, is described in Agnon's story as adapting quickly to his new surroundings:

> And if she broiled the meat in butter, he did not hold back from it. At first, when he would see her twisting the neck of a bird, he would be shocked. Afterwards, he ate and even sucked the bones dry, as is the way of worthless

15. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 204.
16. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 206.

> folks: at first they are unwilling to commit a sin and afterward they commit all the sins in the world with a hearty appetite… He took off his peddler's clothes and put on the garments of aristocracy, and he fell in with the people of the place until he was like one of them.[17]

The main difference between the biblical Joseph and Agnon's Joseph focuses on dealing with the temptations of the foreign world. The former finds the inner strength to break out of the circle of seduction. At the moment of truth the ethical values he brought with him from his father's house come to the fore, whereas Agnon's Joseph submits without a fight. It even seems that he perceives sharing the lady's bed as an achievement, a means of establishing his dubious status in her house. The peddler in Agnon's story is just a faded, pitiful replica of Joseph the Righteous (and of his descendant, Mordecai): with his fawning behavior, his self-effacing gestures, constant bowing and scraping (unlike Mordecai the Jew), his excessive compliments, he almost forces himself on his hostess.

The comparative dialogue between the biblical Joseph and Agnon's Joseph the Peddler is reinforced by a satellite antecedent story, that of Samson and Delilah:

> Anyone who has to do with women knows that a love which depends on a physical bond alone will come to an end before long. And even if a man loves a woman as Samson loved Delilah, in the end she will mock him, in the end she will oppress him, until he wishes he were dead.[18]

Hillel Barzel[19] finds that the connection with the Samson and Delilah episode acts on three levels: (a) on the psychological level it transpires that the love between the peddler and the lady is a fair-weather love—the peddler sought shelter, not love, whereas the lady wanted to eat human flesh and drink human blood; (b) on the plot level their love deteriorates into mockery, distress, and death—Delilah's mockery is reflected in the lady's conversation, the distress is the peddler's, and he is threatened with death by the knife in the lady's hands; and (c) on the national level the story of Samson and Delilah becomes an allegory of the fate of mixed marriages. In the narrator's eyes, Samson's fate attests to the nature of relations between Jews and Gentiles.

Comparing the biblical Joseph with Samson, Zakovitch asserts, places Samson in Joseph's shadow: Joseph was taken to Egypt under duress, whereas Samson went to Philistia of his own free will; Potiphar's wife

17. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 205.
18. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 207.
19. Barzel, *Beyn Agnon le-Kafka*, p. 292.

desires Joseph, whereas Samson wants the Philistine woman. The Philistine woman seduces Samson in order to pry his secret from him, and succeeds, whereas Joseph withstands the seduction. Joseph's faith tips the scale at the last moment ('how could I do this great evil and give offense to God?'), while Samson, despite having taken the Nazarite vow at birth, breaks the vow, succumbs to Delilah's seduction, and is deprived of God's power.[20]

Agnon's Joseph is therefore signified by the Samson allusion as 'a fallen Joseph'. Like Samson he comes to the lady's house of his own free will, and on his own initiative enters into a sexual relationship with her, and again like Samson he places his fate in the hands of the foreign woman who seeks to 'devour' him in more ways than one.

Another analogical element: according to the midrash (e.g. *Gen. R.* 87.7, and other midrashim), at the decisive moment when he almost surrenders to Potiphar's wife's seduction, he sees his father in his mind's eye, a sort of Freudian reminder from his superego, which brings him down to earth in one fell swoop:

> R. Huna in the name of R. Mattena said: 'He saw his father's face before him and his blood cooled off' (*Gen. R.* 87.7).

On the face of it, it seems that Agnon, too, granted his protagonist the strength to reconnect at the last minute with his religious-cultural origins, but the flash of memory from the depths of the blurred consciousness of the exiled Jew appears to be random. Reciting the *Shema* prayer that he remembers at the last minute does not attest to a real victory in the confrontation between the two cultural entities.[21]

Exchanging Names as an Expression of the Intercultural Conflict

Each of the protagonists is referred to by a number of names. The man is called 'the peddler', 'Jew', and 'Joseph', and the woman is referred to as 'lady', 'owner of the house', and 'Helen'. This exchange enables the reader to follow the story's fluctuating forces: in the first part of the story the social-class and national alignment of forces is presented by the use of names: 'peddler' and 'Jew' on the one hand, and 'lady', 'madam', and 'owner of the house' on the other; from the moment the peddler moves into the lady's house and her bed, 'he began to forget that he was a poor

20. Zakovitch, 'Through the Looking Glass', pp. 78-80.

21. M.Z. Kadari has conducted a meticulous study of semantic segments of the story revealing the central conflict: the confrontation between Judaism and cristianity *Shai Agnon: Rav Signon* (Shai Agnon: Master of Style) (Jerusalem: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1980), pp. 131-44.

peddler and she a lady. She on her part forgot that he was a Jew or anything of the sort',[22] the narrator starts calling them by their first names, Helen and Joseph. The words 'Jew' and 'peddler' still appear sporadically and infrequently. In the third part of the story, which is the climax of the confrontation, Agnon uses only their first names, Joseph and Helen, but as representative names they also contain the theological and national elements.[23]

Constructing the Meaning

We have seen that Agnon makes informed use of entire narratives ('Hansel and Gretel', the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, the story of Samson and Delilah), and also of short segments and phrases that are intentionally embedded in the story's semantic setup. These expressions give rise to cultural connotations that define the deeper subject of the story. What, then, is the meaning created when all the pieces of the mosaic are put together?

As I emphasized in the Introduction, the fact that a specific text contains a system of antecedent genetic elements does not mean that the new text is necessarily a monosemic (one voice) recreation of previous ideologies. Each ideosemic component embedded in the new work cuts itself off from the previous system on which it was dependent, in order to begin a new assembling of elements. The allusions are scattered throughout the text and it is the reader who has to connect them and accord them topical meaning. The other question that must be asked addresses the connection between the intertextual poetic choice and the historical-social context in which the story is written. Or in other words, how does Agnon's literary work relate to the reality of 1943, toward the end of World War II, at the height of the annihilation of the Jewish people by Nazi Germany?

Let us first examine a series of changes Agnon made to the antecedent elements he used as building blocks. The story's two main characters, the lady and the Hebrew/Jew, undergo a process of transformation when compared with the antecedent texts. As I have shown, in the midrashic texts that expanded the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, there is a leaning toward 'conversion'. In the midrashic texts Potiphar's wife is depicted as 'a lovesick woman' who is attracted not only to the Hebrew slave's physical attributes, but also to his spiritual and cultural world. These midrashim attempted to reduce the intercultural tension both by

22. Agnon, 'The Lady and the Peddler', p. 205.
23. In Jewish culture the name Helen, or Heleni, represents the foreign pole.

means of a certain defusing of the resistance displayed by 'Joseph the Righteous' toward the temptations of the foreign world, and by bringing Potiphar's wife closer to the spiritual-cultural sphere of Jewish culture (see the discussion in Chapter 3).

Agnon, who wrote his story against the backdrop of the atrocities of the Holocaust, reshaped and radicalized the foreign woman as predatory. In his story the passionate woman becomes a cannibal who feeds on human flesh; in contrast, the masculine 'Joseph' model undergoes an emasculating transformation, or if you will, a 'feminine' transformation. Like the feminine model (of the Patriarchs' stories and the book of Esther), the entry of Agnon's Joseph into the lady's world is attended by deceitful manipulations that he needs in order to create an existential space for himself. Moreover, the Jewish victim in Agnon's story cooperates with his tormentor. He allows his executioner to negate his human status, to erase him in order to devour him. The schizophrenic split characteristic of the 'couples' (Abraham–Sarah, Mordecai–Esther) enables the biblical narrator to present both sides of the exiled Jew—one side maintains its Jewish pride, whereas the other submissive side is 'in prison'—now takes place in the psyche of the same person. The conscious side, which in the ancient stories about Joseph and Mordecai represented authentic, proud Hebrew existence, is repressed and goes underground, and in the 'external' space, on the stage of life, only the enslaved submissive side is able to act.

The Jewish masculine model has gradually deteriorated, and its authentic essence as representative of an alternative spiritual or ethical being has become blurred, if not totally erased. The faith to which the biblical Joseph adhered has become a mechanical ritual voided of its content, and it cannot save the Diaspora Jew who is doomed to continue wandering in eternal exile. In his description of the peddler's circular activity, Agnon underscores the situation by means of Hebrew wordplay: '*chozer*' (returns) and '*mechazer*' (woos). The verb '*chizer*' carries the meaning of '*chizur*', that is, an action connected with an attempt to gain favor, to seduce, to be loved.

Text and Context

When Agnon wrote his story in 1943, real information on the Nazis' atrocities and the horrific outcome of their annihilation machine were not yet fully absorbed into public consciousness. The images, films, stories, and firsthand testimonies of death camp survivors had not yet been presented to the Jewish community in Palestine. Agnon, living in

faraway Palestine, therefore chose mytho-linguistic material to describe the atrocities whose appalling bestiality was still vague and lacking in documented historical proof. What drove Agnon to relate 'the story of the present' by means of a well-known story from the past, and what is the effectiveness of the familiar pattern in reference to the indescribable events of the annihilation of European Jewry? The attempt to provide an answer to this question guided my thinking in two different directions that follow hereunder.

Agnon's choice can best be described as an indirect strategy. His choice of the Joseph and Potiphar's wife pattern, one that is firmly fixed in the collective consciousness of Jewish culture as an allegory of Judaism–foreignness relations, anchored the story from the outset in a linguistic environment detached from the specific historical reality. The dreadful trauma of the Holocaust that Agnon experienced from afar through hearsay is conveyed in his story by means of an allegorical transformation, which of necessity is also abstract in the extreme. This is something that merits further thought. Barthes, in his well-known *Mythologies*, addresses writers' problematic use of preformed patterns, or what he calls 'mythical speech'.[24] It transpires that mythical speech possesses a dual character. On the one hand it is capable of intensifying reality and elevating it to sublime levels, and on the other it embodies the danger of extreme abstraction. According to Barthes, in the semiological system (of symbols and signifiers) mythical speech is perceived as a system of communication within a 'second order' linguistic system. Unlike the first system in which every sign has a signifier in the real world, mythical speech is meta-linguistic: the sign in the first system becomes the signifier in the second. It is a linguistic system that draws its existence from language, not the world. Instead of describing a unique situation located in a specific place and point in time in history, the writer chooses the use of a linguistic mode from the 'readymade' collective-cultural lexicon. The signs, which in the first system still preserved their flavor and power of expression since they are linked to one-time experiences that draw their existence from emotion and the senses, lose their vital force and become 'raw material' for the purposes of mythical speech. Unlike the arbitrariness of the sign in the first system, mythical speech is not arbitrary and always has an ideological intention behind it. According to Barthes, it is 'frozen speech', 'speech stolen and restored'.[25]

24. Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 109-59.
25. Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 125.

Barthes critically addresses the use of mythical speech to describe a specific reality. In his opinion the analogical element ever present in the meta-language must create a distorted picture: from the rich, complex historical reality the analogy extracts only partial meanings that are suitable for its ideological objective. It appropriates from place and time the original experience that served as an authentic basis for the literary work, and transfers it to a sphere of recurring phenomena. If we impose Barthes' conclusions on Agnon's story, we are unable to escape the conclusion that the mythical speech employed by Agnon derives from an abstract stance toward the dreadful experience of the Holocaust. Accordingly, Agnon used 'readymade' language, thus creating from the outset a reduction of the complex historical situation he tried to shape in his story.

One of the ideological conclusions that can be taken from Agnon's story guides the reader of 'The Lady and the Peddler' to conclude that the Jew brought down the ultimate ruination upon himself only because he did not preserve his authentic identity, that is, his identity of faith and religion. Barzel, for instance, tends to espouse an interpretation of this kind.[26] He asserts that in the tale he wrote Agnon addresses the traits of the assimilated Jew as manifested in German Jewry. After Moses Mendelssohn and the Jewish Enlightenment, the Jews of Germany who frequented the salons of German high society (the lords and ladies) saw this as proof of their becoming full citizens. Mixed marriages were common among the Jews out of the naïve belief that being in the lady's company was a sign of their freedom. The Jew sells the lady a hunting knife, or in other words, he holds ruination in his own hands, and he also bears responsibility for the catastrophe that followed this behavior. Furthermore, in the story that was written in Palestine in 1943 there is no hint of a national-political solution. The wandering Jew loads his pack onto his back and continues his journey from village to village as a decree of an eternal fate from which there is no escape.

If this is indeed the main ideological message emerging from Agnon's story, then it attests to a far too narrow observation of the complex situation that led to the annihilation of European Jewry in the twentieth century. According to this interpretation, xenophobia becomes an almost exclusive problem of the Jew, and concern for his rescue and personal safety is in God's hands, whose providence is greatly reduced and is seemingly reserved to those who fear him.

26. Barzel, *Beyn Agnon le-Kafka*, p. 287.

Surrealistic Becomes Realistic

Another direction of thinking takes us back to another look at Freud on 'the uncanny'. Freud speaks about a principle he terms—inspired by one of his patients—'the omnipotence of thoughts': this is that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or *when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes*.

In this context Freud speaks about situations of neurosis that preserve in an individual's psyche animistic narcissistic elements, remnants and traces from previous way-stations in that individual's psychological development. These primitive elements surface in the narcissistic individual at times of crisis, and project his fears onto external reality. By means of the 'omnipotence of thoughts' mechanism, the individual's neurosis protects him against contending with reality as it is, since it convinces the patient that his imagined experiences are more solid than real facts. In our story it is the collective subject that is overwhelmed by the symbolic becoming reality, and the symbolic is not at all imaginative.

What happens when reality turns the 'imagined' symbol—Germany as a cannibalistic woman—into a very palpable reality? What happens when the abstract symbol becomes true reality in all its horrific detail, or in other words, when everything that has been perceived thus far as descriptive-surrealistic language representing the nature of the danger, is nothing but a true reflection of a terrible reality?

Jean Améry was born in 1912 to a Catholic father and a Jewish mother. In 1938 he fled to Belgium, where during the war years he was active in the Resistance, was captured and tortured, and sent to Auschwitz and then Bergen-Belsen. The description of the reality in his book *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* ('Beyond Guilt and Atonement')[27] can serve as a basis for understanding the reversal that took place in the world of the death camps. In Améry's opinion, it was the torture, which is beyond reason, that was the essence of the Nazi regime, for it was in torture that the Third Reich was fully realized. Nazi Germany had to negate the Other (Jews and other peoples) in order to establish the Thousand-Year Reich, and to that end it had to find justification beyond the bounds of reason. In the first essay in his book Améry explains that the Jewish victim who was also an intellectual found it more difficult

27. Translated as Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (trans. Sidney and Stella P. Rosenfeld; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

than others to conceptualize the concentration camp. Nothing that had nourished his being could have helped him to explain the evil that gainsaid intellect. In the end he simply stopped believing in the reality of the spiritual world. Often, after realizing that what was forbidden to exist can exist, after experiencing the logic of the SS in an hour-by-hour reality, he reached the conclusion that perhaps they—not he—were right. Thus the spiritual tolerance of the intellectual became self-destructive. Améry describes the world of the death camps thus: the 'surrealistic' reality became reality even when it went beyond reason. In the world of the concentration camps, he says, unlike the world outside it, a person feels the presence of the reality day and night. He cannot elude it for even a moment since nowhere else in the world did it possess such great influence. And this is what happens in Agnon's story: the surrealistic symbol—Germany as a female cannibal—became an omnipotent reality that not only totally erased the 'real' world of reason, but also purported to replace it.

In this case, can we only admit that the 'reverse mechanisms' that Agnon created in his story as he observed the problematic consciousness situation of Diaspora Jews, adapt themselves to the reality that went beyond reason? It emerges from the story that the Jew manages to live in the Diaspora, on the brink of disaster, because his defense mechanisms have been reversed. Repression dominated the life of the self, whereas consciousness went underground, and all this so that the Diaspora Jew can continue surviving in a constant state of *unheimlich*—in other words, in a world in which the boundaries between illusion and reality, between the symbol and what it seeks to symbolize, have become blurred. But the world in which the Jew is a guest is also turned upside down. The demons rose from within the collective subconscious and completely took over the reality, and all the monstrous creatures that had been repressed by the forces of civilization became omnipotent rulers. The surrealistic became the realistic. In a world such as this the 'reverse' defense mechanisms of the Jewish exile no longer have a role to play. Henceforth they only act to his detriment.

6

Ingmar Bergman: The Madonna's Hidden Sickness

Synchronic Intertextuality

In the previous chapters I addressed texts that held a dialogue on the diachronic intertextual axis. In the discussion I described the transformation of the recurring narrative in the Genesis stories, the book of Esther, the various midrashim, and finally in 'The Lady and the Peddler', Agnon's modern story. In this chapter I wish to extend the boundaries of the intertextual dialogue by including in it one example of synchronic intertextuality.

The difference between diachronic and synchronic dialogue depends on the point of view from which the artistic work is examined: diachrony places the writer at the centre of the study, whereas synchronicity focuses on the reading processes of the reader. When writers are at the centre, the study will mainly focus on an attempt to expose the genetic sources that left their mark on the text. When all the antecedent sources employed either consciously or unconsciously by the writer are made clear, we can expose authorial intentions more accurately. A synchronic intertextual reading places two texts side by side since in the course of each individual reading the reader discovers the texts' analogical qualities. When synchronic intertextuality is created, the similar texts are not perceived as being diachronically influenced by one another, but as poetic worlds possessing common images or a common iconic character.[1]

In the early 1970s Ingmar Bergman's film *The Touch* was screened in Israel. The Israeli reviewers were moved to admiration by the fact that the film dealt with the Holocaust, and emphasized this fact in the publicity leading up to its screening. In the old auditorium in Givat

1. See van Wolde, 'Intertextuality'.

Brenner, the kibbutz of which I am a member, the passionate love story between David, a Jewish archeologist who comes to a small town in Sweden to excavate an ancient church, and Karin, a married woman, was revealed to me for the first time. As this cinematic work slowly unfolded before me, I began to experience what Barthes calls 'déjà lu': I knew this text from somewhere else, but this time it was presented from the viewpoint of 'the Other', and with role reversal.

The Touch

August 1971 saw the premiere of *The Touch*, the director's first 'American' film. Bergman's American agent persuaded ABC to undertake a commercial adventure and produce a film directed by him. The Swedish director who up to that point had worked exclusively with a film company in his own country, AB Svensk Filmindustri, was glad of the opportunity to reach new audiences and create a sort of international film in English, and without subtitles. Max von Sydow and Bibi Andersson were cast as the husband and wife, and as the third side of the romantic triangle Bergman cast the Jewish-American actor Elliot Gould. Bergman had seen Gould in *Getting Straight* and identified in him the ideal qualities for the role of David, the Jewish archeologist.[2]

Most critics and commentators view this film as another way-station in the Bergman odyssey, whose main thrust is the obsessive search for love; in their view, the film's title, *The Touch*, relates to its central metaphor, the desperate need of Bergman's protagonists for a redeeming human touch.[3]

The discussion proposed here offers another interpretation of Bergman's film, whereby at the basis of the realistic interpersonal story lies a deep pattern of man–woman relations as a metaphor for Jewish–Christian relations, but from the Christian point of view. Bergman, who was educated by his Lutheran minister father, frequently engages with Christian theological issues (*The Virgin Spring*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Fanny and Alexander*).

2. See P. Cowie, *Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982), p. 271.

3. See R.E. Lauder, '"The Touch": The Role of Religion', in Stuart M. Kaminsky and Joseph F. Hill (eds.), *Ingmar Bergman: Essays in Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 292-96, and *God, Death, Art and Love: The Philosophical Vision of Ingmar Bergman* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 160-61.

The Film's Plot

Bergman chose a medieval town as the setting for this modern love story. The story unfolds against a densely medieval Christian backdrop: the walls of the old town, its buildings, church steeples, and particularly the ancient church where the lovers hold their assignations. The soundtrack is dominated by the pealing of church bells, together with or counter to other background sound effects.

The plot unfolds around the complex relationship between David and Karin. David, the Jewish archeologist, is invited to the small Swedish town in the framework of his scientific work and by chance meets Karin, a married woman with whom he falls in love. In one scene the lovers are leafing through David's family album, and like Karin, the audience becomes aware of his life story, the story of a German-Jewish family during the Holocaust. Before the Nazis' rise to power, his father ran a mental health clinic in Berlin. When the Jews were threatened by imminent danger, the four-year-old David and his mother were sent to New York. All the family's relatives who remained in Germany perished. When he grew up he went to study archeology in Jerusalem but did not settle in Israel. He wandered the world going wherever his scientific work took him, and was presently engaged in a dig in a small medieval church in Hammar, Sweden. In the course of his stay, David needs medical attention, which he receives from Karin's husband, Dr. Andreas Vergerus (Max von Sydow). At first it seems that David is suffering from kidney stones, and it emerges only later that he had attempted suicide. Andreas invites David to dinner at the couple's home, and it is there that the affair between David and Karin begins. During dinner David tells them about an amazing find in the old church: the hammer of one of the team accidentally hit a wall, and there in a hidden recess they found a beautiful ancient wooden statue of the Madonna and Child. This iconic element is an important focal point in constructing the film's symbolic meaning.

The lovers' relationship has numerous ups and downs, violent sex scenes coupled with scenes of conciliation and tenderness, and an unexpected parting. It is during one of the crises in the relationship that Karin discovers she is pregnant. It appears that the love child is David's, but it is not absolutely certain that this is the case. Without warning David goes to London, leaving her without an explanation. She follows him to England where she meets his sister Sarah. David had told Karin that his whole family had perished in the Holocaust, but now it appears that his sister survived too. Sarah makes it clear to Karin that she and her brother have a special relationship and that he will never leave her. It

further transpires that both David and Sarah are afflicted with a hereditary degenerative disease. In the silence that engulfs the two women after this confession, the question of the health of the baby Karin is carrying hovers in the air. Her meeting with David's sister gives Karin a new insight. She decides to sever her ties with David, but does not terminate the pregnancy. After a few months of separation, David meets Karin again. She, who is in the advanced stages of pregnancy, is waiting for him in one of the small glasshouses in the botanical gardens outside the town. David tries to persuade her to build an 'ordered' life with him: marriage, a house, a family, since a Danish university has offered him tenure. Karin declares her love for him, but rejects his proposal because she is obliged to stay where she is, with her family. She breaks away from David's embrace and turns to leave. He shouts after her, 'I know you're lying', but she moves away. Her lonely figure is reflected in the waters of the lake.

Unresolved Interpretational Problems

Bergman's text has been given numerous interpretations.[4] In all the attempts at interpretation I have read there is insufficient reference to the Christian-religious elements with which this cinematic text is replete, both in the plot's background and in its central motifs and images. These feature, in my opinion, cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the interpretative position based on a perception of the film as representing a realistic world encounters numerous difficulties from every aspect. The relationship depicted in the film raises innumerable unresolved questions, which Gado enumerates (but for which he offers no solutions): Why does Karin fall in love with David at the family dinner at which the guest is extremely rude? Why does she continue the complex relationship with David even after he humiliates her, and even physically assaults her? The revelation of David's hereditary disease introduces a completely new element into the story, and has no connection with the main subject—David's ambivalent attitude toward Karin. His hereditary disease does not explain his decision to leave Karin. If he feared transmitting the disease to Karin's baby, he should have taken precautions, and if he wanted to save her the trouble of caring for him once the disease worsened, why, then, did he return and propose marriage? Why does Karin not tell David about her meeting his sister Sarah, and why is Karin persuaded to relinquish her hold on David after that meeting? Karin's pregnancy continues

4. See Lauder, '"The Touch"', and *God, Death, Art and Love*; F. Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), pp. 403-407.

to pose questions: she decides not to terminate it. There can be no doubt that this decision places her husband Andreas in an awkward position. Andreas himself disappears from the scene in the last part of the film, and we do not know how he intends to cope with the living reminder of his wife's infidelity. And what about David? Does he not sense that Karin is pregnant? Karin comes to their last meeting seven months pregnant, so David cannot possibly ignore it any longer, but still he makes no reference to her condition; the pregnancy and the unborn child are not a subject for discussion between them, which given the special circumstances would seem to be the right thing to do. From the moment that Bergman's imagination was sparked and focused on the notion of the statute of the Madonna and Child, Gado contends, realistic rationality was sacrificed on the altar of symbolism.[5] The discovery, however, does not significantly influence Gado's interpretational strategy—he does not reveal the 'hidden text' and does not offer adequate answers to the plethora of questions he himself poses.

'The Touch' as a Religious-Allegorical Text

The viewer has to ask himself why this modern triangle story takes place against such a highly underscored medieval Christian background: the ancient town with its church steeples; the peal of church bells which is almost always heard in the film's central scenes, and the statue of the Madonna and Child, one of David's most important archeological finds, which doubtless bears analogical and metaphorical Christian meanings. Additionally, the elements that construct the profile of 'the foreigner', the Jew, and 'the Other', Christian side, are highlighted in a way that does not enable random interpretation. Gado identifies in David the stereotype of the 'dark-skinned stranger' of the romance genre, but stops at this functional definition of a complex character in which the director apparently invested far more directed thoughtful effort. Bergman provided David with a Jewish biography that is both typical and representative: his personal story is connected with that of the Holocaust; he presents clear signs of neurosis, he occasionally harbors suicidal thoughts, and he moves from place to place without being able to put down roots. The director's choice of the American actor apparently stemmed from Elliot Gould's typically Jewish appearance. In the first part of the film Gould sports a thick beard, doubtless on the director's instructions, since

5. Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*, p. 405.

changes in the type of beard he wears—a full beard, beardless, a shaped beard—become a means of identifying the protagonist's development in the course of the film.

In Andreas, Karin's husband, too, the viewer can identify clear representative lines of the other, Christian side; Andreas (Andrew), Peter's brother, is the name of one of the Twelve Apostles. In the division of the Apostles' spheres of influence, Andrew (Andreas) is appointed to the northern kingdoms. In the film Andreas unmistakably represents Christian compassion. He treats David following the latter's attempted suicide, invites the stranger into his home, and even after his wife's infidelity he is prepared to take her back, and with love and compassion restore her into the bosom of her family.

In the overt layer the plot focuses on a description of the ambivalent relationship between David, Karin, and Andreas, which is the very nature of every triangle story. The covert layer is realized by means of a different network of signs, mainly 'pre-constructed signs'—visual, iconic, and metaphorical. By using the term 'pre-constructed signs' I seek to define the archaic schemas taken from the deep layers of the culture (in this case, Christian culture) which are reconstructed in the modern work by means of intertextual connections, in the broadest sense of the term. In this way two semiotic nets are spread in Bergman's film: whereas the realistic plot seemingly represents liberal values of acceptance of and openness toward the foreigner, the covert analogical plot represents the traditional ambivalent attitude of Christianity toward the Jew. The audience finds itself in a conflictual arena in which the clashing voices converge.

To sharpen the allegorical interpretive perception, I propose a close scrutiny of several central elements of the cinematic work:

(a) Two episodes from the exposition.
(b) The metonymic language with which the director shapes the setting of the film.
(c) The iconic language.

The Exposition: Crossing Boundaries

Let us closely examine the sequence of the film's opening scenes. The long opening sequence was filmed by Gunnar Fischer almost as a complete work in itself. Except for the opening sequence, the entire film was shot by Sven Nykvist, Bergman's director of photography. The long exposition is shown before the credits appear. A small white car is seen approaching the hospital. Karin gets out and walks quickly into the

building. In the corridor she is met by a doctor who tells her that her mother passed away fifteen minutes ago. Karin goes into her mother's room where the body is lying in repose on a hospital bed. The body's tranquility and the half-open eyes are the only signs of the transformation that has recently taken place in the living body. Church bells are heard in the background; the camera pans in on the mother's hands laying peacefully on the sheet, while highlighting in close-up the double wedding band on her finger. Outside, the noise of quotidian reality goes on. For a moment the pulsing of life comes into the room, with the soundtrack focused on the sound of the engines of the cars passing on the main road outside the hospital; the camera pans over the silent monitors by the patient's bed. The clock shows 2.55. Karin takes her mother's hand, lays her head on her bosom and kisses her.

Bergman's biographers think that this impressive opening scene was influenced by the death of his own mother. A few years earlier, in 1966, Bergman stated that he was influenced by the death of an actor friend, but the more immediate memory, according to Cowie, was apparently the sight of his father's body in the hospital right after his death. He said he saw his father fifteen minutes after he died. His head was turned toward the window. His eyes were half closed and it seemed he was looking further, to some distant place. It was strange and very beautiful, almost secretive.[6]

The deathbed is white (sheets, blanket, the patient's robe); Karin is wearing a red coat (red, the color of blood, the hue of sensual life, signifies Karin throughout the film). She encounters a nurse as she leaves her mother's room, who asks what they should do with her mother's belongings. Karin replies succinctly that they will pick them up next day. The nurse then inquires about the mother's wedding rings, and understandingly says she'll fetch them. The nurse goes into the mother's room, comes back with the rings, and places them in Karin's hand. All at once Karin is flooded with the touch of the rings on her hand, the irreversible tangible reality of death. As if blind, she feels her way along the corridor, opens the door of a small cloakroom, and there, in a corner, she collapses in an ever-increasing bout of weeping. The camera focuses on her tear-stained face. The door suddenly swings open and David bursts in. The camera focuses on his dark features, his hair, his beard, and his warm brown eyes. He sees the weeping Karin and asks if he can help. She asks him to turn off the light, to go, and leave her alone. He goes out.

6. Cowie, *Ingmar Bergman*, p. 272.

It is only after this long sequence that the credits appear against the beautiful backdrop of old Visby. The movement of the camera over the ancient walls enclosing the town, the churches, their steeples and bell towers, is accompanied by a melodic soundtrack.

The protracted exposition presents one of this work's bipolar concepts: boundaries and boundary-crossing. At first life touches upon the impassable domain of death, and then the stranger intrudes almost violently (albeit unintentionally) into the intimate circle of the individual's grief; and finally the camera focuses on the walls enclosing the old town, emphasizing the boundaries of 'the interior' as opposed to 'the exterior'. The clock ticking away on the wall of the room where the mother's body is laying and the noise of passing cars from outside, emphasize the silence of the monitors that are no longer needed; Karin's red attire and her emotional turmoil stand out in stark contrast with the total whiteness of the deathbed, and the total tranquility of the dead body's posture; the individual's grief isolates the mourner in a closed circle into which anyone not involved in this personal grief cannot enter, and the town walls are the boundary between friend and foe, between 'us' and 'them', and they defend the restricted space within them against the stranger's incursion. In the proposed ideological context David's entry into Karin's world can be interpreted as a foreign entity breaking the bounds and entering a sphere closed and forbidden to it.

The Garden of Eden, the Serpent, Disguises and Masks

In the next sequence, which I propose for observation, we see Karin and Andreas strolling with David in the big garden surrounding their house. On the screen is a color-filled garden with autumn leaves in a variety of warm hues (in a later scene, Karin and Andreas are collecting windfalls from the apple trees in their garden). Karin is wearing a red dress with a white scarf, a sort of reminder connecting with the previous scene of the whiteness of death in the hospital. Andreas leaves them alone to take a telephone call. With total disregard for conventional manners, David quizzes Karin, asking her if she is happily married. Somewhat shocked, she says she is, and he asks in an ironic tone if everything in the garden is rosy. A moment later he surprisingly confesses his uncontrollable love for her, love ignited in him at their chance encounter in the hospital cloakroom when he saw her weeping heartrendingly after her mother's death.

David's direct behavior can be identified as liberation from the shackles of bourgeois conventions, as befits the role of the seducer who dares to undermine the sanctity of marriage. But 'the garden' allusion forms a covert analogy between the man who bursts into the tranquil, protected married life, and the garden of Eden's serpent. It is perhaps not by chance that David's conversation is characterized by rhetorical-ironical questions, like those of the Serpent ('Hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree in the garden?', Gen. 3.1).

During dinner David tells his hosts about the statue of the Madonna and Child discovered in the old church in Hammar, and he emphasizes that no one knows how this wonderful statue found its way to Sweden and this remote church. Archeology, however, does not gain much interest around the dinner table. Karin, a devoted housewife, is totally immersed in her role as hostess, while Andreas tries to interest their guest—who drinks almost incessantly—in his slide collection. He wants to show him one particular slide that after much effort is finally discovered in the pile of family slides. It shows a rare orchid, *Orchideous insectifera*, a beautiful predatory bloom that disguises itself as an insect in order to attract insects which it devours. David, who is drunk, asks Andreas if he has any photographs of Karin in the nude. With the aplomb of the perfect host and ignoring his guest's boorishness, Andreas smilingly replies that he does not.

This scene activates another bipolar concept: the interplay between covert and overt, the disguised and the real. The predatory orchid disguised as an insect; the statue of the Madonna and Child (which reappears as an iconic-metaphorical element) hidden in one of the church walls behind a sort of stone mask that concealed the real thing; is the stranger who was given such a warm welcome concealing an unforeseen threat?

The first physical contact between David and Karin takes place in the churchyard. In the next episode Karin visits the excavation site in the old church, where with his flashlight David illuminates the statue in its recess in the wall. The beam of light reveals the mysterious smile of the Madonna's face. For several long seconds a close-up shot focuses on an ancient relief set into the exterior wall of the church. The relief shows the coiled Serpent whose head and tail are joined with a double ring. Karin touches the relief and David puts his hand over hers. This is the first erotic contact between them, the touch that will ignite their passion and lead to an ambivalent, frenetic, and tortured relationship.

By highlighting the archetypical image of the Serpent—once by means of dialogue (when he asks her if everything in the garden is rosy) and again with the visual sign of the Serpent—the director fleshes out the symbolic language, the 'pre-constructed signs'. The idea of 'crossing the line', of entering a forbidden area, of original sin, is formed in both the symbolic and visual language and is dominated by the world of Judeo-Christian images.

Old versus New

The director selected two locations for the action: the home of Karin and Andreas, and David's rented apartment in the town's old quarter. The family home and the rented apartment create a contrasting tension that serves as a metonymic extension of the characters (and on the analogical level of the representations). The Vergerus home is an elegant and spacious house, which Andreas inherited from his parents. It is surrounded by a big garden, lawns, flowerbeds, and apple trees. The house's interior is dominated by white. The furniture, the various accessories, the curtains, are all white. Karin invests great effort in her housekeeping. For several long minutes the camera follows the 'bourgeois housewife ritual': she vacuums, loads a washing machine and dryer, takes clothes from a closet for dry-cleaning, and returns to the closet a perfectly aligned pile of clean, freshly ironed shirts. The director's focus on these trivial actions runs counter to all the rules of spare artistic text.

David's rented apartment is located—and not by chance—in an old, rundown building in the town's old quarter. The walls of the stairwell are dull brown and their paint is peeling. Traces of neglect are particularly prominent inside the apartment. The furniture is old and haphazardly arranged, the whole apartment is dusty, and even the red roses in a vase on the table are wilting. As she comes in Karin remarks that it is an awful, 'depressing apartment'. In the love scenes that take place there David is usually wearing a threadbare robe, and his beard, long hair, and the hair covering his chest and back seem like an almost furry pelt covering his ungainly body.

On the realistic level the two locations represent the encounter between Karin's ordered yet sterile bourgeois lifestyle, and David's bohemian, disorderly but arousing life. Gado's psychological interpretation attributes importance to the first scene, which describes the mother's death as a critical point. In his view the mother's death allows Karin to break the bounds. Now, after the death of her mother, the source of

normative authority, the normative brakes are released and the ground is prepared for the incursion of the bohemian stranger into Karin and Andreas's orderly but sterile life.

On the allegorical level there is another dialogue. The 'ecological' setting is designed to represent the differences between 'old' world (of Judaism) and the 'new' one (of Christianity). Thus the old world (the Old Testament) is presented as a deteriorating, decaying world of disorder—from the moral standpoint too—when compared with the new world (the New Testament) that is presented as a world of light, order, compassion, and empathy.

The Relationship: Attraction–Repulsion

After the first confession of love and the first physical touch in the churchyard, David and Karin's relationship undergoes ups and downs. Their first sexual encounter in David's apartment ends in failure. Karin insists that David look at her naked body as she enumerates her physical shortcomings: her legs are too short in relation to her body, her breasts are heavy from nursing and are not as pert as they used to be, she has a scar on her belly from the difficult birth of her son; she also talks about her lack of experience as a lover; it seems that her frankness inhibits David, and they fall asleep in each other's arms without consummating their passion.

The second encounter is undoubtedly influenced by David's impotence at the first. David, who has had too much to drink, restlessly paces his neglected apartment. He has a desperate telephone conversation with Karin, and demands that she drop her family duties right away and come to him. After an argument Karin comes to the apartment. The despairing David tells her he has swallowed a cocktail of sleeping pills, to which he has added a large quantity of drink. He behaves brutally and tries to force himself on her. The sex scene is shot with brutal explicitness, almost as rape. At the climax of the act he shouts 'Don't look at me!', and as he climaxes he utters some words in German, 'Nazi' being one of the identifiable words in his incoherent mumbling. The soundtrack accompanying this callous scene includes the roar of a power-saw, apparently coming from a nearby workshop.

Once again Karin meets David at the dig in the church, where she finds him brushing a human skull that has been uncovered. She complains about the difficulties in their relationship: he is not answering either his phone or the doorbell. It appears that he does not know how to handle his emotions.

At their next meeting in David's apartment, in a rare moment of closeness he tells Karin his personal story. Leafing through his mother's family album rouses harsh memories, the story of the family that perished, the story of his and his mother's rescue, his studies in Jerusalem. If it seemed to the audience that his intimate disclosure would place their relationship on a basis of mutual trust, the continuation gives the lie to their expectations. The first stage of the relationship comes to an end. David leaves Sweden to undertake other assignments in Europe. In the correspondence between David and Karin the difficulties in the love/passion story are seemingly forgotten. They impatiently await their next meeting. David comes back to Sweden six months later, this time clean-shaven. The truth revealed from now on will consistently destroy all the illusions: Andreas discovers his wife's infidelity; in the confrontation between the two men Karin discovers that her husband treated David after a suicide attempt, not for kidney problems, and the statue of the Madonna and Child is attacked by a dormant insect that awakened and began gnawing at it from within.[7]

One of the following episodes takes place after a festive lunch at the conclusion of a scientific conference initiated by Andreas. Making an excuse, Karin abandons her role as hostess, and in all her finery hurries to the old town. David answers the door, untidily dressed as usual in a shabby robe. Karin complains about the apartment's perpetual darkness, and undresses quickly to go to bed with her lover. A heated argument ensues. As he moves closer to her he smells nicotine and drink on her breath, and this after they promised each other to stop smoking and drinking. Instead of kissing her he slaps her hard, knocking her to the floor. Karin's attempts at reconciliation come to naught. David's anger is uncontrollable. Karin leaves the apartment and goes down the stairs, choked with tears. As a reminder of her guilt, on the staircase she is passed by an elderly woman who resembles her mother (the director intentionally cast the same actress in both roles). David bursts out of the apartment, and with his nightwear in disarray runs down the stairs, grabs Karin, kisses her, and takes her back to the apartment. The conciliatory love scene is extremely tender. As opposed to the grating sound of the power-saw that accompanied the rape scene, their reconciliation is accompanied by the melody heard in the film's opening sequence. They undress very slowly. David's head touches and rests on Karin bare breasts. Their lovemaking is consummated with great tenderness.

7. Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*, p. 403.

Thus, throughout Bergman's film the relationship is rocked back and forth from attraction to repulsion, emotional turmoil and detachment, rapprochement and distancing. The relationship becomes even more complex once Andreas hears about it. Karin feels that separation is imminent, and after a prolonged wait for a sign of life from David, she goes to his apartment and finds it empty. Her photographs and letters are in one of the sideboard drawers. The place has been abandoned. The power-saw screams in the background. The shocked Karin fills a glass of water at the kitchen sink and sips, then the glass drops into the sink and shatters. She takes a shard of glass and stabs it into her palm; perhaps the physical pain will overcome her heartache.

The Statue of the Madonna and Child

The statue, the most important find in the archeological excavation, is the most highly charged iconic element of the allegory. Karin and David's second meeting in the old church takes place after Andreas has discovered that his wife is having an affair. Karin and David go into the church and stand by the statue, with the camera focusing on the three figures. The wooden statue is in a recess between the two lovers, with a beam of light illuminating it like a halo. David tells Karin about the change that has taken place in the statue—its wood is being eaten away by an insect whose larvae had laid dormant for five hundred years. Exposure to light had awakened the insect and it was now destroying the statue from within, taking a particularly heavy toll on the figure of the Child. David remarks that the insects destroying the statue are no less beautiful than the statue itself. Karin disregards the story of the statue. She talks about the nature of their relationship. She is aware that their parting is imminent: she tells him he hates himself, so he hates her as well. She says of herself that despite all the difficulties she would be able to live a double life with two men, and gradually connect the two worlds. Andreas, she says, might even accept it, but it is impossible to live with David's self-hate. They go out of the church. The camera again focuses on the Serpent relief. Again, Karin places her hand on it, but on this occasion her hand is gloved. The churchyard is covered in snow and ice. David asks her forgiveness and takes her hand in his. They are both wearing gloves. The conciliatory embrace is only a brief lull, for in the following episode Karin discovers that David has gone to London without an explanation or leaving a message, and the apartment that was their love nest is empty.

Sarah

The agitated Karin follows her lover to London where, in an apartment whose furniture and other objects are strewn about, she meets Sarah (who tells her they are moving to another apartment). At first she thinks Sarah is David's wife, but then realizes that she is his sister (after David had told her that his whole family had perished). The encounter between Sarah and Karin is a fateful one. Sarah is the first to guess that Karin is pregnant. She also tells her about the family's hereditary disease. Sarah's twisted hands clutching her drink highlight her muscular dystrophy. David too, Sarah tells her, has the disease. Has this terrible disease been transmitted to the fetus Karin is carrying? For a long moment her fear fills the two women's silence. Sarah states decisively that David is her brother, that they have a lot in common, and that he will never leave her.

Couples: The Chosen and the Rejected

If we summarize what has emerged from the description so far, we can see that Bergman's film can be connected to two familiar Christian conceptions that are embedded in the work by means of a rich web of signs, visual, metaphorical, and iconic. The film presents a relationship between a woman and two men, both of whom want to be her husbands. The Church Fathers draw our attention to the fact that the Bible is rich with stories about couples that have one member rejected and the other chosen: Cain and Abel, Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Manasseh and Ephraim, and Saul and David.[8] The Christian allegorical reading viewed these couples as a symbol and allegory of Jews and Christians. The central biblical testimony on which Christian sources are based relies on the words of God to Rebekah: 'Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger' (Gen. 25.23). For Christians the Old Testament is but the first part of the Holy Scriptures. Both religions believe in the divine promise to Israel, but the bone of contention between them is who is the real Israel. According to the Christian perception, history has shown that the divine choice abandoned the Jews and that they are now in the position of the rejected son. The Christians inherited their place and status as the chosen son, and they are now the real Israel.

8. See Ora Limor, *Beyn yehudim lenotzrim* (Between Christians and Jews) (Tel Aviv: The Open University, 1993).

According to Ora Limor, the wealth of images or 'cultural language' of both faiths attests to a common way of thinking. Both espoused images to define abstract ideas, and often employed the same language of images in opposite meanings. For instance, whereas 'Esau' in the Jewish language of symbols means 'the other', for Christian philosophers 'Esau' is the equivalent of 'Jew'. The fundamental biblical images are common to both religions, with each retranslating them in specific historical situations in accordance with its accepted division of roles.

As we have shown, the division into allegorical couples includes both female and male couples. The male couples are interpreted according to the image of father–son relations (the rejected son and the chosen one); it seems that the female couples are interpreted according to the image of man–woman relations (the preferred woman and the rejected one). From the beginnings of Christianity expression was given to the notion that Judaism and Christianity are a pair, a couple of sisters but also rivals, in the religious depiction of *Ecclesia et Synagoga* that appear as a pair in both medieval and Renaissance paintings and sculptures. The dialectical mutuality in relations between the two religions sees members of the other faith as both brothers and rivals. Or in other words, as two women married to the same husband (god). *Ecclesia et Synagoga* are presented in medieval cathedrals as two women in accordance with the ideal of beauty of the time, but without historical details. They are eternal and universal abstract figures. The artists gave both a crown, but that of the *Synagoga* is askew, the tablets of the Ten Commandments are slipping from her hand, and she is blindfolded. The fall of the tablets of the Ten Commandments attests to the turnabout that occurred between the previous and new eras. In 'the era of the Law' the Ten Commandments were designed to prepare the people from which the Savior would come, but with the advent of Jesus Christ who in his death atoned for the sins of humankind, the commandments became obsolete, and redemption would come through the power of compassion, love, and light.

Let us now go back to Bergman's film. Background material is suddenly given its full meaning in the new presentation and moves to centre stage. Bergman creates his own adaptation of 'couples'. Instead of two women married to the same man (*Ecclesia et Synagoga*), Bergman relates the story of the 'double marriage' of one woman to two husbands.[9] (It is not by

9. Researchers of Christianity, headed by Nonna Verna Harrison, speak of the woman's body as a metaphor side by side with the spiritual aspect of Christianity. Cited in D. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 145.

chance that the close-ups emphasize the image of the double marriage, both in focus on the double wedding band on the dead mother's and Karin's finger, and also in the twice-recurring close-up of the ancient relief showing the head and tail of the Serpent bound together with a double ring.) 'The one husband', the Jewish one, represents the old world: he is engaged in archeology, lives in the town's rundown old quarter, and his immediate surroundings attest to a process of degeneration and deterioration; he suffers from a neurosis, wanders from place to place as if cursed; he has a hereditary degenerative disease and his touch is contagious. 'The second husband', the Christian one, represents the enlightened, ordered world. In contrast with self-hate, the devouring neurosis, and the depressive-suicidal thoughts of the first, the second is characterized by an empathic attitude, one of mercy and compassion. Despite his wife's infidelity Andreas is prepared to forgive her, take her back and care for her, if she promises to leave her lover. Unlike the touch that causes sickness, Andreas is a healer (and as we know, Christianity nurtured the image of Jesus who healed by his touch). Bergman creates an additional analogy. Karin is Andreas's wife, and like Mary, wife of Joseph the Nazarene, the man responsible for her pregnancy is undefined. Is she pregnant by David or her husband?

Bergman therefore draws on both the Christian and Jewish cultural languages, while readapting the ancient pattern to his own artistic purposes.

What, then, emerges from the mosaic? In my opinion the director forms a clear analogy between what happened to the wooden statute of the Madonna and Child (which is being eaten away by an insect from within it) and Karin, who is carrying the child that is possibly the fruit of her forbidden love for David. Karin's exposure, like that of the Madonna, to 'the touch' of 'the other', dialectically activated in both of them the forces of life, but also the force of destruction. Karin is unable to connect the two poles. For a moment it seems that she can live with both; she is sure that Andreas, who represents compassion, would be prepared to accept this duality, but the other, Jewish side is incapable of this union that mandates relinquishment.

'You Are my Sister'

Together with Karin, the woman torn between the two men who wants to conciliate and connect them, the film presents another 'couple': David and his sister Sarah. The name Sarah and the family connection create an analogy with Abraham and Sarah, and also with brother–sister rela-

tions that are on the borderline of an incestuous relationship. Sarah forcefully mentions this to Karin, saying that she and David are alike in everything and that he will never leave her.

It therefore seems that Bergman's protagonists are doubly trapped. The Jew cannot 'cross the line' to the Christian world because he cannot change his inner nature (a problem that Karin defines as 'self-hate'). When the Jewish stranger tries to touch the other world to which he is attracted and from which he is repelled, his touch is simultaneously dialectical, revivifying, and destructive. But his remaining in his own world, fettered by 'the family' ('You are my sister'), is presented in the end as a problematical decision, as incest. The radical choice of reclusion and isolation inevitably leads to one kind of contamination or another, to sacrilege and guilt feelings.

Bergman's cinematic work thus proposes a dialectical answer to the question of the Jew's place in the fabric of Christian life. The Jew is presented as destabilizing order: from the moment he penetrates their home it becomes clear to Karin and Andreas that their seemingly stable, orderly world is not really stable at all. The obsessive orderliness in which life in the home is run was nothing but a mask behind which an emotional void was hidden. At a certain point it transpires that the 'foreign' element had been there for a long time, but was hidden like the statue of the Madonna and Child deep in their recess behind the church wall, and in a state of incubation. Does the image of 'the contaminated Madonna' reveal latent or unconscious anti-Semitism in the director? Not necessarily, albeit it remains a possibility. The stranger here is also cast in a positive role: the chaotic side is confronted with the 'cleanliness' and 'order' of the other side, and exposes the destructive aspect of sterile compassion. Had it not been for the intrusion of the stranger, the culture of 'clean' compassion would have sunk into lifeless routine. The stranger's touch is fertile and awakens forces of vitality and passion, even though they involve suffering and pain. Karin and David's final encounter takes place in the tropical plant house in the botanical gardens. Everything is flowering, green, succulent, and sends out branches, leaves, and tendrils. Karin herself is heavy with child, her belly holding new life within it. The stranger will continue his wandering but will leave behind traces of his touch, the blessed-cursed touch of the Jew.

7

Inta Omri: Exile Is within Us

From Theology to Sociology to Politics and Back

Thus far this study has engaged with works in which the intercultural dialogue has been exposed through man–woman relations as representative of a mythical-theological conflict. In modern Hebrew literature starting from its rebirth period, a certain shift occurred. The interreligious confrontation was adapted to a different arena. Love between a Jewish man and a non-Jewish girl became a widespread motif in the literature of the rebirth period, and it even found expression in the works of the most Jewish of writers such as Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, Jacob Steinberg, Chaim Nachman Bialik, and Shai Agnon. In his 1993 article published in two installments in *Ma'ariv*, scholar Aharon Komem posits that the reason for the incidence of this phenomenon is in the childhood and youth environment of these writers.[1] Life in the Diaspora in the post-emancipation period presented the Jews with opportunities for integrating into the non-Jewish society through mixed marriages. Komem mentions writers such as Saul Tschernichovsky, Gershon Schoffman, and Jacob Steinberg whose first marriages were to non-Jewish women. On the face of it, it seems that the traditional motif of man–woman relations as a metaphor for Jewish–Gentile relations was thence transformed from the national-religious sphere to the sociological one. In these stories, relations between Jew and non-Jewish woman are not described as a struggle between two worldviews, each of which claims absolute, transcendental truth, but rather in terms of a social or class conflict: a man or a woman are actually attracted to one another because of the exotic foreignness, and the sexual tension between them enables a breaking of the bounds of nationality, class, and culture.

1. In his article Komem mentions Berdyczewski's '*Mahanayyim*' (Two Camps), Steinberg's '*Hatzer atzilim*' (Aristocrats' Court), Bialik's '*Me-ahorei hagader* (Behind the Fence), and Agnon's '*Ha-adonit ve-harokhel*' (The Lady and the Peddler). See '*Hagibor hayehudi vehana'ara hagoya: hadegem hagavri vehadegem hanashi*' (The Jewish Protagonist and the Gentile Girl: The Masculine and Feminine Models) *Ma'ariv*, Literature and Art (15 September 1993; 24 September 1993).

It would therefore seem that the antecedent story with which we engaged would disappear in the new political reality that followed the establishment of the State of Israel. The Diaspora was replaced by a permanent residence, and the Israeli Jew was no longer a guest subject to the grace and favor of his hosts in a foreign territory. But as it transpired, the special sensitivity in the sphere of intercultural, inter-national relations was preserved. Amos Oz's 1963 story 'Nomad and Viper' and his 1968 novel *My Michael*, and A.B. Yehoshua's 1977 novel *The Lover*, are well-known examples of this. The Jewish man or woman became Israelis and representation of 'the Other' is now by an Arab. To the recurring model are added other elements and new dilemmas posed by the Israeli sociopolitical reality: the Israeli is no longer in a situation of foreignness and repression. The role-play has changed, and the conflict between the two representations is intensified in the harsh reality of occupier–occupied relations. Additional ethical questions arise from the new context: Who is the guest and who the host? which of the opposing sides is the authentic native? Is the native identity mainly based on a prolonged physical connection with the place, or can the spiritual-historical connection that existed for centuries in the Diaspora, nourished as it was by desire and yearning for the ancient homeland, yield a native identity with moral validity?

According to Komem, one of the surprising changes occurs in man–woman role reversal. In all the rebirth-period authors there is an erotic relationship between a Jewish man and a Gentile woman (the masculine model), whereas in Israeli literature the dominant relationship is between an Arab man and a Jewish woman. The feminine model is typical of almost all the native-born Israeli writers (with the exception of Joshua Sobol's *The Palestinian*). The relationship between the Jewish man and a 'shiksa' engenders less anxiety than that between an Arab man and an Israeli woman. 'The significance of the feminine model is that the Arabs could not vanquish us on the battlefield, but they can beat us in bed, in the lust for life, in biology.' Another possibility he mentions is that writers like Yehoshua and Oz avoid portraying a reverse relationship between an Israeli man and an Arab woman so as not to affirm Jewish rule over the Arabs. According to this interpretation, the sex act between a man and a woman becomes an invasive act, an act of occupation carrying political meaning.[2]

2. See the recently published novel by author and playwright Orna Akad, in which the man is Israeli and the girl Arab. Orna Akad, *Wadi Milekh* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2012).

The discussion that follows is devoted to the novel *Inta Omri*[3] ('You Are my Life') by author-poet Semadar Herzfeld, whose plot describes the passionate love between an Arab man and a Jewish-Israeli woman against the backdrop of the First Intifada. I chose Herzfeld's novel because it does not exclusively lend itself to monosemic interpretation. The action takes place in the sociopolitical milieu of Israel in the late 1980s, but it preserves the allusions connecting it with the traditional-theological repertoire.

The Novel's Plot

Semadar Herzfeld's novel *Inta Omri*[4] was published in 1994. It portrays the love between an Arab man and a Jewish woman against the backdrop of the First Intifada, and is narrated in the first person by the Israeli woman. According to the author, the novel contains some autobiographical elements.[5] The young woman, Semadar (the author's name), works in a bookshop of the old kind, which is overflowing with old books and is a family business run by the vigorous Mrs Hochberg and her two brothers, whose exaggerated love of books—according to the sharp-witted Mrs Hochberg—is liable to drive the business into financial disaster. Omar, the Arab lover, is a waiter in a nearby café where the two first meet. Semadar discovers that Omar has been working in the café for two years and she did not even notice him: 'I saw a hand, just a hand that served a coffee cup in a saucer'.[6] The first contact takes place at the moment the man 'sees' her as an individual ('You've got cappuccino eyes'). This develops into a tempestuous love story. It soon becomes clear to them that they have no 'place' in Israeli existence. Their first meetings take place in Semadar's car, which is a sort of bubble, a world closed to the outside, as they drive from place to place. They move between different places, each of which is an ideological, not only geographical signifier: the old ruined Arab village from where Omar's family was exiled to a refugee camp in Jordan; the Jezreel Valley, the cradle of the kibbutzim and moshavim, the heroic starting point of Jewish pioneering settlement

3. The novel's title is taken from a song of the same name. *Inta Omri* is one of Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum's best-known songs. The song, which gained great acclaim in the Arab world, is a monologue of love and yearning by the woman lover to her beloved.

4. Semadar Herzfeld, *Inta Omri* (Tel Aviv: Sifrei Hemed, 1994 [Hebrew]).

5. See A. Negev, '*Rayiti masheu she'koriym lo Aravi*' ('I saw something I knew was called an Arab'), *Yedioth Ahronoth* (Seven Days) (9 December 1994), pp. 28-30.

6. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 9.

in Palestine; and the army base where Semadar did her military service. They meet in busy public places like supermarkets, and afterward in places far from public view, in the no-man's-land of pre-1967 Jerusalem, and finally in the garden of the city's abandoned Hansen Leper Hospital. None of the couple's meetings take place in a location that is 'home'. Semadar does not take Omar to her apartment, nor does he take her to his family's village. Where does Omar himself live? In East Jerusalem or one of the West Bank towns? This question remains unanswered. In other words, the ontological question of 'the place' is presented as unresolved, and in many respects the novel's protagonists are presented as nomads and exiles in their own country.

One of the novel's principal questions is related to the issue of defining the native. Who is it that enters foreign territory? Is it the Israeli Jewish woman who crosses the border into her Arab lover's world, or perhaps it is he who crosses the line into hers? How can we define the territory of 'the home' when both sides view the place—Israel of the late 1980s—not only as not-home but also not-exile?

As mentioned above, neither of them takes the object of his/her love to meet relatives or friends, and even when their relationship becomes intimate and erotic they are still haunted by mutual suspicion: can they trust one another, can they base their relationship on genuine loyalty, or must they live in constant fear of betrayal by the other side? The harsh recognition slowly matures in both of them that in the present situation they have no possibility of realizing a life together. From the depths of their despair the only solution they can see is death, the ultimate crossing of the border. After prolonged planning (What kind of weapon? On what day? Where?), in the course of which every aspect of the suicide pact is weighed up from both the emotional and symbolic standpoints, they select the location: the ruins of the old Arab village where Omar's family lived for many generations; the means are also chosen—sleeping pills hoarded for months by Semadar; and the date—the 23rd of September, the day of the Autumnal Equinox, another image of a liminal point frozen 'between times'. Semadar and Omar drive to the village, and in the car where they decided to take their own lives, they take the sleeping pills. A Jewish archeologist who comes to the village well in the heat of the day finds them by chance and gets them to hospital just in time. Their lives are saved, but henceforth each of them will take a separate route and be doomed to a life without love.

Biographies and Stereotypes

The author gives her two protagonists representative biographies and intentionally describes their characters stereotypically. Semadar is a third-generation Israeli, born in Tel Aviv, her mother speaks Hebrew and her grandmother Yiddish and English.[7] We learn that her grandfather was a Torah prodigy who was sent to Palestine to study under Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.[8] The description of her appearance highlights her European features: she is tall, light-skinned, and has auburn hair;[9] Omar has black curly hair, dark aquiline features, and thin almost black lips. His family fled 'the old village' during the War of Independence, lived for a long time in a Jordanian refugee camp, and later moved to 'the new village' built beside the camp. Omar studied at the American High School in Shu'afat and later attended university; he also tried his luck in the United States but returned to Jerusalem. He cannot find suitable employment befitting his academic talents, and the café where he works is run by a radical right-wing Jew.

It seems that the author has premeditatedly painted her two protagonists in bold ethnic-national colors. Each is emphatically designed as a schematic silhouette that has (or should have) a clear part in the well-known role-play. Their falling in love has continual ups and downs, and also a moment of intimate closeness. But their visit to the ruined Arab village gives rise to feelings of fear, suspicion, and even an emotional outburst in Semadar, which rises from dark, unconscious depths:

> …like cutting up a Torah scroll with a pair of scissors, or going to the synagogue on the Sabbath with a pig. That's how Omar disgusted me and I called him a traitor. Generation upon generation of mumbling, phylactery-wearing Jews boiled in my blood and burst from my lips with the age-old cry: 'Excommunicate them! Excommunicate the traitors!'
>
> I knew it was a lie but I kept my enthusiasm. The ancient call to the flag, to the Holy Book, to my anonymous forefathers who sanctified the name of Israel, and the name itself—Israel, all roiled in my blood in the heat of belonging. I belong, I'm inside and he's outside. Expelled. You don't pity traitors just as you don't pity dogs. You stone them and drive them away.[10]

The subject of the novel is quite naturally bound up with the existential-political problem of Arab–Jew relations in Israel: Omar suspects that Semadar is a security service agent who wants to entrap him, whereas she

7. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 13.
8. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 66.
9. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 14.
10. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, pp. 34-35.

fears that he will harm her in order to be hailed as a hero in the hostile Arab society; the sexual relations between the two are consummated by means of political metaphors:

> Even when he was completely inside me he didn't stop the penetration. There was nowhere else to penetrate and he continued penetrating, into my legs, my back, the wall, he penetrated me to the point where I was no longer me. I was his mother, his warship, his stolen land, he penetrated me and saved the sinking ship, he penetrated me and resurrected his dead mother, he penetrated me and retook his land.[11]

It frequently seems that the two accomplish the role-play of the colonial world: she is the lady in a white dress and Omar the dark-skinned servant, and so forth.[12] When the two decide to take their own lives, Omar steals his employer's gun. Suspicion quite naturally falls on the Arab worker and he is taken in for questioning. Omar did steal the weapon, not for a nationalist-terror attack but for the joint suicide. On the face of it, all the details of the reality populating the novel fill the quasi-real experience with 'political' facts and guide the reader to a type of topical-contemporaneous interpretation. But the novel's deeper layer does not reductively comply with this interpretation. As the surprised reader will see, Omar does not convey bitterness toward the occupying Israeli; on the contrary, he perceives the occupation, perhaps paradoxically, as an opportunity for extending the sphere of his personal liberty. The Israeli occupation frees the young Arab from the shackles of traditional Arab society, and gives him a chance to shape his life independently: 'I didn't call it freedom, but it's what I felt. That my freedom had increased. That from now on I'm allowed to be what I always wanted to be: a seaman.'[13] The Israeli occupation that destroyed the old world, also destroyed the traditional frameworks that naturally fettered Omar's life, and guided him to enforced choices along predetermined tracks.

Intertextual Relations

As we shall see, in Herzfeld's novel too we can uncover the deep questions by means of the intertextual discourse. The novel is narrated in the first person by the female protagonist. Accordingly some of the intertextual allusions are embedded in contemplation and thoughts as part of

11. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 84.
12. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, pp. 68, 137.
13. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 44. The sea appears frequently in documentation of the Arab population in the occupied territories of Judea and Samaria in the form of wishful thinking, since the West Bank is landlocked.

the narrator's stream of consciousness, or in other words, as part of her ideological worldview.

The main thrust of the intertextual system of allusions focuses on defining the nature of the deep conflict that frequently takes place within the traditional Jewish identity: the constant struggle between nature and spirit. In the course of her protracted contemplation in an attempt to define her 'new Israeli' identity, Semadar thinks about the twins, Jacob and Esau who symbolized the eternal struggle between the two possibilities. The two options—nature and spirit—which in Jewish tradition became a struggle between two poles: God and Satan. Judaism swings between the two adversarial forces, both of which are seductive, weakening, as well as strengthening.

When the Jewish people was religious, the narrator muses, it was a mythological people that believed it was part of a struggle between forces several times greater than the world of nature: God and Satan, Jews and Gentiles, Tyre and Jerusalem, Jacob and Esau. The shift to secularism suddenly opened a new–old option to the Jews: the Jew's return to nature. Therefore the loss of faith was a liberating process that made the secular Jew independent. Henceforth he could invent new ideals, a new ideology, establish a state. Here, the narrator contends, the great contradiction was revealed: the Israeli state was founded on the only strip of land that according to the old mythology was truly important: 'Why is it important to us', Semadar asks, 'if we're no longer religious?'

> I'm a Jew of the new kind, the daughter of parents who are also of the new kind, and I don't understand what the Jews of theology are saying. The day I was born was the 7th of Adar, Moses' birthday. The first two letters of my name are *samekh* and *mem*, like the old codename for Satan (Samael). So who am I?[14]

A reading of *Inta Omri* makes it clear that Herzfeld is trying to rebuff the attempt of the cultural group to which she belongs to lead individuals into predetermined role-play. Just as she does not want to be trapped in the mythological role-play, she also seeks to free herself from colonial role-play. Each time it seems to her—as an outside observer of herself—that the picture of her and Omar is perceived as one of 'lady' and 'slave', she shudders and is nauseated: 'And suddenly we both revert to the old game of Jewish woman and Arab, lady and servant, cop and thief'.[15] Use of the word 'lady' is unusual in Modern Hebrew, and it seems that its intentional choice plays a connotative role that echoes in both the

14. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 68.
15. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 137.

biblical story of Genesis 39 ('his master's wife') and Agnon's 'The Lady and the Peddler', with role reversal. Semadar describes her disgust with the colonialist role-play as follows:

> I was sitting on a big rock on the roadside, smoking a cigarette and thinking how colonial it all was. The woman in the white dress is sitting waiting on the side, and the dark-skinned man with the tight-fitting jeans is changing a wheel… I was a barelegged woman in a white dress who'd got a flat tire. He was an Arab guy changing the wheel. But there was something wrong, something black and scary happened somewhere behind the colorful scene. The black, scary thing was coming closer. It was afternoon, a hot, early summer day, a Mediterranean summer is yellow and scorching. I was sitting in the yellow sun in the burning air and I felt the cold and the darkness like an eclipse of the sun.[16]

The question of national-religious and feminine identity gives her no peace: because of her Jewish origins is she doomed to play the ancient mythological game, the 'Jacob and Esau' game? Because of the political circumstances is she bound to play the old game of 'lady and servant'? Does the fact that the first two Hebrew letters of her name, which are the first two letters of Samael, bind her to her instinctual nature as a woman?

Exile as an Existential Condition: Yearning for Another Place

Against the backdrop of the intensified stereotypical portrait of the protagonists whose role it is to underscore the imposed role-play, Herzfeld creates the psychological space common to her and Omar: the sense of exile within 'the home' and the romantic, unremitting yearning for 'another place'. Semadar dreams about the enchanting East, whereas Omar dreams of the sea. Both are an expression of escape, and also of the inner knowledge that this desire for a different reality is in fact an impossible one.

Semadar was born and raised in Tel Aviv, where according to her she learned to hate:

> In Tel Aviv I learned to hate. I hated the peeling grey paint of the houses. And the white-hot color of the afternoon. And the black of the cockroaches. And the glimmering blue of the State of Israel's last street. When I lived in Tel Aviv I hated so many things that I didn't have the strength for the other children. They grew up beside me but I didn't have either friends or enemies among them. My beautiful place was hiding in the East.[17]

16. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, pp. 68-69.
17. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, pp. 125-26.

Semadar perceives the return of the Jewish people to its historical homeland as another exile:

> The real things happened overseas. They happened in England, they couldn't have happened in an ancient Semitic language. They couldn't and didn't want to happen in a remote place where people live like punished children with their face to the wall. Yes, God abhorred us, He sent us into exile in a poor, crowded place, filled with narcissi and malaria, He sent us into exile among magnificent ruins, to this comatose East with its dreams.[18]

The Dream of the East

What is the East in Semadar's eyes? It swiftly emerges that for Semadar the concept of 'the East' represents a different entity, a fantasy mainly based on literary images. In her view the East is an old king who has lost everything and sunk into a coma. The white people who came to the East from Europe (i.e. the British and French colonialists) did not come in order to become easterners, but to promote their own interests. They ruled it, made their money, and went back home. They did not want a home, and the East admired and respected them, and also offered them traditional eastern hospitality. But when the Jews came to the East, the rules of the game changed. Like the European guests, they too came to rule, manage, and profit, but unlike the Europeans they had nowhere to go back to. They did not have homes anywhere else. They seemed like visitors, behaved like visitors, but intended to remain and take over the country. The industrious pioneers who settled in the wild multiplied, and now they threatened to take over everything. The Israeli Jews do not want to sink into the coma of the East, they came here in order to act, to build roads, buildings, and run things. They do not respect the king of the East and have no fear of making war on him. And the sleepy eastern king embarks on a lost struggle for 'the wild expanses, for velvet nights sprinkled with moonlight pearls. He fights for the tranquility of the nights, the soft waiting silence that is regularly broken by a braying donkey, a bellowing pig, croaking frogs.'[19]

Semadar lives in Tel Aviv, which she sees as place of exile, and she yearns for the sleeping East, for the dark nights and the mysterious fantasy that will perhaps be deciphered in Omar, her Arab lover, a sort of eastern prince who for her represents a type of literary 'orientalism' within the harsh reality of 'The Orient'.

18. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 40.
19. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, pp. 40-43.

The Dream of the West

Omar dreams about the sea. As a thirteen-year-old boy he almost welcomes the occupation of 1967: 'And when you came in, despite what I'd heard about you and even though I was scared of you, I wanted to run to you and leave here with you. I wanted to escape to the West, I almost ran and asked you to take me to the sea.'[20] Indeed, an Israeli soldier takes Omar in his jeep to the beach in Tel Aviv (and does not come back to pick him up in the evening as he had promised). Omar spends the summer months by the sea, gazing at it, listening to the sighing of its waves, inhaling its tang. He sees it as a huge bear that changes its pelt: blue, green, pink, grey, and the night bear, black with gold adornments. When he returns to his village after two months on the beach, where he works for the lifeguard as a cleaner with a bin and rake, the villagers greet him as if he had returned from Mecca. His time on the beach plants in him the courage to ask the military government for permission to study at a secular school, not with the *hajj*, and he is accepted at the American High School in Shu'afat, which opens for him a window onto the big world, the West which is across the sea in our geographical region.

A Meeting in the Surrealistic Dream

Semadar, who was born in the 'offensive exile' of Tel Aviv, longs to hear the voice of Umm Kulthum:

> To think in a different, heavy and intoxicating language, I began thinking in the language of Umm Kulthum. You became my life, my dawn, I was no longer ashamed of using descriptive terms. For the first time in my life I was painted in starlight. And the country, the people, of whom I was ashamed all my life, also shone with a new sparkle. I didn't hate my place anymore. I whispered to my love: Come along, we can still make up what we've lost.[21]

Omar, who was born where there is no sea, impatiently wants to reach it. He talks about the sea, the movement of the stars, the fish, the crabs, but also about 'mermaids, monsters, sea gods with hair as green as seaweed. And the names of ancient heroes: Odysseus, Magellan, Da Gama, Captain Cook, and all kinds of stories about stricken ships, sunken treasure, gold boxes trapped in the forest of coral. Or in a whale's belly.'[22]

'I remember thinking', Semadar says, 'how it happened that I, who grew up by the sea, didn't like it at all and he loves it so much'.

20. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, pp. 43-44.
21. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 39.
22. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 127.

The lovers meet one another in their surrealistic imagination, in a 'place' unrestricted by social or religious mores, and each of them plays the leading role in the other's fantasy. For Semadar, Omar is the prince dreaming of the eastern kingdom, whereas for Omar, Semadar is the unattainable love, a sort of Juliet to his Romeo, an impossible (Western) love story that will end—guided by Omar—in a suicide pact. If Semadar wanted to free herself from national-cultural images and the mythical role-play forced upon her, it now emerges that at best she replaced one symbolic world with another. Like Omar, she is captive in a literary system of images whose tyranny is not lesser than the ones they seek to free themselves of. It seems that the harsh reality does not allow a real encounter within the sociopolitical reality, and drives the two protagonists into the realms of imagination.

The Exile: Yearning for Another Place

What happens to someone who is born in a place that is not a place, or as Jacques Derrida puts it, there is no 'place' in his place?[23] In the novel Omar and Semadar are presented as two detached people. We have seen that Semadar hates Tel Aviv where she was born, the bastion of the new Israeliness, and Omar, who lost his village before he was born, is unable to reconstruct another place as a substitute for it.

The old village comes to life only in Omar's imagination. Memories of it are not authentically held in his mind, for he was born after the expulsion:

> Even before he was born he was exiled from the old village with his family, the neighbors, all of them left the old houses, leaving them reddening on the hillside, they left the olive and fig trees, the donkey trail that climbed to Jerusalem, they left the heavy wooden furniture that had been stroked by young, older, dead brides, by the fingers of children jumping like crickets, by the hands of old men outstretched like two black wings toward Mecca; and all those touches, all those smells that together are contented family comfort. Early one evening, years before he was born, they left it all covered by reddening sunbeams, sinking with the sun's disc, moving away to the west.[24]

Over the years the tangled vegetation rose, mainly huge *sabras*, prickly pear scrub, almost covering the old village. The place had stood desolate for forty years. The old houses were scattered among the bushes like 'lost sheep'. The old village had been built in a special way. Unlike other Arab villages, the mosque did not tower from a high place, and the

23. Jacques Derrida, from a lecture delivered at the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Centre (7th Jaunary 1998).

24. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, pp. 12-13.

houses did not climb toward the hill summit. A holy spring that burst forth from the ground during a harsh drought after God answered an old man's prayers (a sort of Honi the Circle Maker story),[25] determined the village's unique layout. The mosque was built next to the spring, and houses were crowded around its outlet. Huge holes have opened up in the houses' flat roofs. The Israeli army sappers blew up the roofs. 'Whoever did this wanted to keep the houses, but wanted them empty', says Omar, but he cannot understand for what purpose: so that others might live there or to use it as a sort of museum, but a museum of what?[26]

Omar heard all the descriptions and stories about the village from his father and the other village elders, and their stories construct his memories. It is not a real village but one that resides solely in his imagination. Omar lost his place before he was born. He also lost his mother in the wake of the expulsion and exile. When the family was driven from the village, his mother was pregnant with his oldest brother. She gave birth to him along the way, in a field, and consequently lost her mind. She died suddenly at the age of thirty-five, when Omar was eleven. As we have seen, when he grew up Omar left the village and severed his ties with his family and the other villagers who had rehabilitated themselves and built a new place.

Herzfeld shapes her Arab protagonist as a symbol of absence and spontaneously forms a very powerful analogy with the enduring situation of the Jew. According to Kristeva, the foreigner, the exile, is 'a fanatic of absence'. With 'the other place' fixed in his imagination, in his apathy the exile denies all the suffering and affront, all the possible rejections. His entire being is focused on a constant search for the promised land that exists only in his dreams, the terra incognita whose real name is 'the place beyond'.[27]

The Place Beyond

The second place that is given symbolic force is the garden of the Hansen Leper Hospital in Jerusalem. While searching for a suitable place for their suicide, the couple chance upon a garden hidden behind high walls. The hospital has long been abandoned and no longer fills its

25. Omar tells Semadar the story of the stubborn old man whose prayers led to the spring bursting forth, and readers cannot but think of the cultural-narrative repository common to the two cultures that had experienced the hardships of drought in an arid region.

26. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 26.

27. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, pp. 4-5.

designated role since leprosy has been almost completely eradicated. But the huge garden is apparently tended by an invisible gardener: its rose bushes with their red and white blooms are arranged in beds and are pruned, and the flowerbeds are watered. The isolated garden, with its almost unending silence, 'the enchanted garden' as the lovers call it, becomes a preferred refuge for them, 'a wild combination of the Garden of Eden and a city of refuge'. At its centre, in a bed of white lilies stands a single black lily in all its loneliness:

> The black leaves burgeoned, halted, and froze. Yes, that's what it was: a strange, frozen form of burgeoning. And when it froze the agonies of restraint began. Yes, the real agonies began after the burgeoning. Its leaves gleamed like damp basalt, at any moment, I thought, at any moment it can burgeon again.[28]

There, in the enchanted garden, Semadar can finally go to sleep after a sleepless week, a week in which their suicide pact finally matured. The garden is the antithesis of the banal, outside world that in Semadar's opinion is so clearly marked with lines and borders that must not be crossed. 'Beyond them you go mad. Or are bewitched. Or die.'[29] Therefore the garden is a total realization of 'the world beyond' that is only reached by border crossers: the mad, the bewitched, or the dead. The couple, the present-day lepers who dared to cross the marked border, have no other options for existence within the 'outside' world.

In summary, what can be said about the re-adaptation of the antecedent pattern as it emerges from Herzfeld's novel? In the previous works examined, several dominant characteristics were preserved: in all the previous transformations of the story the Jewish protagonist is in the exile's existential situation, whereas the Gentile protagonist is the host. The existential situation of the homeless exile in a foreign world is shaped, as we have seen, in two competing patterns. In the first the exile employs a manipulative seduction mechanism as a means of survival. The manipulative pattern is presented in the Abraham stories, the book of Esther, and Agnon's 'The Lady and the Peddler'. It is the weapon of the weak who strive to exist in a dangerous and menacing reality. The second pattern, that of 'Joseph the Righteous' and Mordecai, offered a different option: to protect the cultural-religious isolation, sexual abstinence whose role is to paralyze and even negate the potential of seduction, or in other words, to prevent the sexual encounter which, according to the book's central thesis, represents the cultural-religious encounter.

28. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 105.
29. Herzfeld, *Inta Omri*, p. 104.

There is also the 'schizophrenic' version that attempted to sustain life in duality. Beneath the surface of all the versions presented there are dichotomous tensions between nature and spirit; isolation or mutual enrichment, home and exile. The arena wherein the antecedent versions of the story exist is to a great extent abstract from the outset. As I have shown, the protagonists are shaped as representative characters, and from the outset the guiding principle is allegorical.

In her novel *Inta Omri* Semadar Herzfeld attempts to create a different space for the encounter, and she builds her stereotypes only to destroy them. The central dilemma common to all the earlier manifestations of the pattern—the isolation of the Jewish people, its unique mission and role in the world as the antithesis of 'nature' as the opposite pole to the ultimate 'other'—become in Semadar's inner deliberations a type of ideological repressive mechanism that imposes meta-historical role-play on the Jew, from which the female protagonist seeks to free herself. Israeli identity, Jewish identity, what Zionism calls 'the Diaspora', Jewish culture and Jewish and Israeli history, are all fluid, open, and in contention. The Jew has a state-home, but most surprisingly the concept of 'home' is presented in the novel as an empty, unrealized signifier. The roles are reversed. The political reality turned the Arab into an exile, but Semadar, too, is incapable of fortifying a 'home' for herself in the old-new place of the Jewish people. Both she and Omar see themselves as exiles, and both are dominated by a sense of absence.

In the antecedent stories passion as an activator of interaction between the two sides was treated with extreme caution. The stories as well as the midrashim written in the stories' contexts, 'release the tiger' while trying to capture it at the same time. Activating the passion mechanism is presented mainly as a means of survival, and sexual restraint is lauded as part of safeguarding the Jewish character. And now direct, naked, purposeless passion is the main subject of Herzfeld's novel, and its tremendous power expunges—for a while, at least—all the other forces. The common territory is that of Eros, but the passion cannot surmount the gap between the two worlds, and in the end is replaced by Thanatos, the death instinct to which the two sides become enslaved as the last resort. The struggle of the two protagonists, Arab and Jew, is ineffectual against a society that formed the values and norms that shackle them.

8

Conclusion: Intertextuality as a Sociocultural Practice

Our discussion proposes a dual poetic and ideological project to the reader. The poetic project focuses on demonstrating the intertextual dynamic in Jewish culture as a collective-cultural practice; the ideological one relates to the construction of meaning that carries with it 'the big story', or the meta-text connecting all the stories. One conclusion is almost self-evident: the recurring story and its elements are based on a trans-individual fundamental structure that traverses the borders of time and place. It is not a personal story describing the history of a specific person, but that of an entire community. Each story is a sort of metamorphosis of its precursors, transformations of a story which, from numerous standpoints, is the collective story of the Jewish people.

It seems that the basic pattern was formed at a very early stage. The story that opens the history of the Jewish people presents the Patriarch Abraham as the first exile. In Canaan, his new homeland, he is only a guest without rights who 'dwells' in and 'passes through' it, and also leaves it during the famine. Even the sobriquet of the patriarch of the tribe, '*Ha'ivri*', he who passes from place to place, embodies all the history of the future as a genetic factor.

The story of the exiled Hebrew/Jew has kept its place down the generations of Jewish culture, drawing its vitality from prolonged exile as a fundamental experience in the Jewish people's collective consciousness, and each time anew this basic pattern has recurred and made itself accessible. The power of the recurring narrative over other patterns is undoubtedly derived from the unique force of this story, both from the rhetorical standpoint and that of its psychological effect on the reader, but as I have shown, the use of a system of antecedent elements does not mean that the new text reconstructs the earlier text's ideology. Each antecedent element embedded in the new text cuts itself off from the earlier system in order to enter a new dialogue, and the changes and

adaptations made by every generation attest to a dynamic intergenerational dialogue whose role was not only to preserve the earlier worldview, but also to subvert the validity of the earlier positions in the context of other times and places.

The three recurring stories of the Patriarchs entering foreign territory, or of Joseph who was taken from his family into Egypt, into Potiphar's house, stories that present relations with the foreign world as erotic, fixed not only the common subject—an exile situation—in the collective consciousness, but also the image of man–woman relations as analogous to relations of Hebrewness with the foreign world. The ancient narrators and midrashic sages that followed them were aware of the possibilities laying at the basis of the representative structure, and made fascinating use of them. Of particular importance in our case is the story of the book of Esther. The threads woven by the book's narrator that connect the story with the two models of the antecedent story, the story of Abraham and Sarah and that of Joseph, attest to the fact that the antecedent pattern based on a plot and a permanent system of predetermined motifs, was fully familiar to him and served as a 'mirror basis' for the astute, ironical version he proposes.

The exile experience common to the Jewish community from its historical beginnings therefore created its 'myth' in symbolical language, and the recurring narrative in its various transformations turned the story into a paradigm.

'Masculine' and 'Feminine' Judaism

The question of when Judaism is represented by a man, a woman, or a couple, or what is the meaning embodied in role reversal, serves as one of the elements whereby the narrators use their license within the pattern's fixed framework. The changing role-play enables the narrators of different generations to mark the exiled Jew's situation on a time and place continuum. Side by side with the image of man–woman relations as representing either desired or enforced intercultural contact, appearing in some of the works is another alternative whose role it is to represent—according to my interpretation—the seclusion option: brother–sister relations. The man–woman pattern is sexual, whereas the second, brother–sister relations, represents autoerotic asexuality and barrenness.

According to my proposal the 'man' and 'woman' signifiers should be addressed as having undergone a coding process. We should bear in mind that we are referring to time measured in millennia and a protracted process of multi-generational transmission. The story patterns, including

those that appear to us as primary, have already undergone patterning processes at the hands of the generations that orally related them before they were written. The various narrators display creative talent in adapting the stereotypical material, and they play with the representative images most unusually.

When the narrator seeks to convey undeniable ideological values, an uncompromising acceptance of cultural norms, he shapes a role-play whereby the man is a Jew and the woman represents foreignness. Surprisingly, only one monosemic example is presented in the course of the examination: the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39), but as we have seen, it too has been blurred in the changes made to the original antecedent story by the Midrash and post-biblical epigraphic literature. All the other examples are dominated by either the feminine, schizophrenic model, or the 'effeminized' model in which the figure of the Jewish man undergoes a feminine transformation.[1]

One of the most interesting discoveries emerging from the recurring narrative pattern addresses the hidden strength of the weak. The biblical and midrashic narrators show us how the weak Hebrew protagonists exploit the 'weakness' of their strong rulers by means of their heightened sexuality. They are captured by powerful potentates (or predatory cannibalistic ladies), taken to the palace—the ultimate symbol of phallic power—but they turn the tables and from captives become their captors' captivators. This narrative pattern provided the Jews with the pretext of enforced submission and enabled them to remain at the core of the foreign culture. 'Weak', 'feminine' Jewishness was allowed to give itself to the foreign potentate by its male partner, the 'strong', 'proud', Jew. 'Feminine' sexual beauty is thrown into the maw of the palaces to highlight the fact that 'male' meta-sexual spiritual domination is neither in any territory whatsoever, nor in the hands of any ruler whatsoever, nor in his harem. On the other hand, in their stories these anonymous writers and their successors, the midrashic sages, managed to sketch a hidden layer running counter to that of representational meaning. They dared to add critical, and even ironic, voices to their rewritten story, as we have shown for instance, in the discussion on the book of Esther.

1. In Daniel Boyarin's enlightening 1997 study, *Unheroic Conduct*, on the mentality of the Jewish Man as it was formed in the course of their prolonged exile, the author presents the ideal of the effeminized man. Based on an analysis of several Talmudic stories he seeks to show how a trend was formed in the Jewish people to the shaping of non-phallic masculinity that also accords value to weakness (p. 125), as a refutation of the aggressive Roman culture. They formed the male society of learners that replaced physical-bellicose values with spiritual ones.

As opposed to the option of the mixed couple representing intercultural contact (or fear of such contact), several works offer another alternative: brother–sister relations. This image eradicates the potency of Eros from the man–woman relationship, and radically represents the seclusion predisposition.

In *Yalkut Shimoni* (Noah 247.62) we found a late midrash that connects Sarah's protracted barrenness with the 'sister' motif. It describes Abraham and Sarai as asexual figures in the initial period of their life together: '"And Sarah was barren"—Rabbi Bar Akhva said: Sarah was barren, as it is said, "And Sarah was barren, she had no child", she even has no womb. Rabbi Ami said: Abraham and Sarah were epicene, as it is written: "Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you"' (Isa. 51.1-2). We can conclude from the description in Isaiah that Abraham's and Sarah's sex organs were hewn in them like a cleft hewn in rock. Before our very eyes, says Melila Hellner-Eshed, a picture emerges of a sexless man and woman as hard as rock. They seem like a brother and sister, and are completely immersed in the new ideological message they carry. In their total commitment to the notion of the One God they wander from place to place on their journey, with no time for Eros, sex, or family.[2]

What is it, asks Hellner-Eshed, that eventually causes Sarah's pregnancy and her giving birth? And her bold answer: perhaps it was the journey to Egypt. Canaan is a harsh and arid land, whereas Egypt is a sensual place, a place of water and abundance. It is the Egyptian experience that led to an essential change in Sarah and Abraham, and it is in Egypt, perhaps, that Sarah became fertile. Midrash *Tanhuma* relates that it is only on their entry into Egypt, on the banks of the Nile, that Abraham sees his wife's beautiful image reflected in the water (*Lekh-Lekha* 5). It is only when the Egyptians see her, says Hellner-Eshed, that for the first time Abraham sees her as a man sees a woman. Not only Sarah had an erotic experience in Egypt—Abraham, too, when he took Hagar the Egyptian as his second wife, underwent a similar experience resulting in the birth of Ishmael. The Egyptian erotic experience of contact with the other saved them both, the 'sister and brother', from the curse of prolonged barrenness.

2. M. Hellner-Eshed, '*Akaruta shel Sarah*' (Sarah's Barrenness), in Tanya Zion (ed.), *Sippurey reshit: du-siakh al she'elot enoshiot be-sefer beresishit* (The Genesis Story: Discussion on Human Questions in Genesis) (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2002), pp. 267-71.

Erotic energy was diverted from its usual path and channeled into love of the One God. Any cultural or inter-religion contact with the Other was liable to endanger the new message, and did perhaps actually jeopardize the success of the Abraham project. But the narcissistic, autoerotic reclusion bore other dangers: over-abstraction, breaking off contact with the sensual body, the body of life, isolationism that was perceived as arrogance. Reclusion within the family, overabundance, and self-sufficiency would eventually harm the cultural vitality and also feed the other's hate.

Seclusion or Universality?

Fundamental cultural patterns always present deep questions. The question is one, but the answers may be many and varied, as emerges from the story's transformations along the time continuum. The discussion on the various stories raised a variety of questions, of gender (the attitude toward the stories' female figures), philosophical issues (the contrast between nature and spirit), and dilemmas of identity arising from Jewish life in the Diaspora under the hosts' aegis. In my opinion, the deep question common to all of them can be marked on the axis of the constant tension between seclusion and intercultural contact. The question of the tension between the tendency toward isolation—the demand for a clear distinction between those who belong to the Hebrew/Jewish community and those who do not—and the missionary propensity that opens up the possibility of joining the cultural-spiritual community to the whole world, has remained unresolved to this day.

Hugo Bergmann states that the starting point of Jewish history is marked by separation and isolationism. God commanded Abraham to sever all his ties with his father's house and his homeland, to leave the country, and wander to a land that God would show him. But as a direct continuation of the verse that thus commands him, God says: 'And you shall be a blessing…and all the clans of the earth through you shall be blessed'.[3] This dialectical duality accompanies the reader throughout the Bible, and the tension between the notion of the holy choice of the Jewish people and the universal tendency that seeks to offer monotheistic faith to all humankind, remains unresolved. One stream in Judaism is isolationist, hostile toward the Gentile, and nurtures what Bergmann calls 'the Amalek Complex', whereas another stream is characterized by the 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' commandment.

3. H. Bergmann, *Bamishol* (On the Path) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976), p. 16.

Numerous verses in the Bible and post-biblical literature emphasize the uniqueness of the Jewish people by its being completely distinguished from other peoples: 'And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant' (Gen. 17.7). The opponents of this covenant were condemned to destruction: 'Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass' (1 Sam. 15.2-3). The concept of separation was manifested in stringent laws forbidding the Jewish people to assimilate through marriage: 'An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the assembly of the Lord for ever; because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt' (Deut. 23.4-5); 'And that we would not give our daughters unto the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons' (Neh. 10.31). Edomites and Egyptians may enter the assembly only in the third generation, the Edomites because they are perceived as a sister nation to Israel, while the Egyptians are granted a special dispensation, 'because thou wast a stranger in his land' (Deut. 22.8-9).

The laws of separation and isolation that are based on blood relations therefore run completely counter to the universal aspect of the covenant: every human being is created in God's image, and according to the ethics of the Fathers, the commandment 'Thou shalt love they neighbor as thyself' includes love of the stranger. Numerous verses in the Torah stress the obligation to behave respectfully toward the stranger, 'And a stranger shalt thou not wrong, neither shalt thou oppress him; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Exod. 22.21); 'And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not do him wrong. The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God' (Lev. 19.33-34). According to the perception of the biblical law, the period spent in Egypt as a persecuted foreign minority had to influence the people's attitude toward minority groups, and should guide it toward bringing them closer, but it seems that this attitude remained solely as a recommendation, an ideal not actually put into practice.

Consensually, only one solution is offered to 'the other': joining the Jewish people by converting to Judaism. In her fascinating discussion on the book of Ruth, Julia Kristeva emphasizes that the concept of '*ger*' in

Hebrew includes an interesting duality. The term refers to the foreigner, a resident without political rights, but it also serves as a legal definition of the convert, the person who accepts the holy covenant. Therefore at the basis of the definition lies a complex dialectical concept: although the people have been chosen, the right to be 'chosen' is open to all but only on condition that they accept the commandments of the holy order.[4] In other words, the only possibility is to assimilate into the Jewish people since conversion does not allow adoption of the spiritual Torah without embracing Jewish nationality.

How is the dilemma presented in the 'big meta-text'? In the course of the discussion on each of the stories, I have attempted to present the richness and complexity embedded by the different narrators in each of the examples examined. In this summary I intend to trace the movement of the pendulum between the poles in broad lines and from a panoramic viewpoint. Its presentation from a bird's-eye view is of necessity abstract and reductive, so I can only rely on the reader who from the previous chapters has learned the possibilities not mentioned here.

At the basis of the starting point of the history of the tribe, we can find clues of the unresolved tension between the seclusion and universality trends, between the perception of the mission unique to the Abrahamic family and its descendants, and the missionary perception that seeks to open the gates of the new faith to all. God blessed Abraham: 'and all the clans of the earth through you shall be blessed' (Gen. 12.3), but Abraham distinguished between his family and 'the others': 'For I thought, there is surely no fear of God in this place' (Gen. 20.11). The implied author seeks to show us that there is insufficient justification for seeing 'the others', the members of the other culture, as people who do not behave in accordance with the moral norms of the Abrahamic family. On the face of it, the story proves that Abraham did not fully comprehend the abovementioned blessing—'and all the clans of the earth through you shall be blessed'.

'Joseph the Righteous' loyally represents the proud Jew who with all his might holds onto the values and norms he brought with him to the foreign world, norms that stand out in stark contrast to the accepted values of the new environment in which he finds himself. But as I have shown, the same story, of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, is given some fascinating midrashic adaptations, from the Hellenistic period to the ninth century (e.g. in Midrash *Tanhuma*), which swing the pendulum in the opposite direction. In the midrashim the ability to live in a state of

4. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 68.

prolonged exile with a certain degree of acceptance is translated into a series of changes both in the figure of Joseph as representing isolationist Hebrewness, and that of Potiphar's wife as representing the other culture. Both of them move closer to create a sort of common space in which coexistence, and even relations of assimilation and influence can be formed. But in the end, in these midrashim, too, a last front remains from which there is no retreat.

Another position, as expressed by the implied author of the book of Esther, speaks soberly and even ironically about life in duality. An entire Jewish community lived among 'others' in the Persian kingdom, and each day anew coped with intercultural and inter-religious relations that became second nature. But on the 'subversive' level, whose covert actions in the book are revealed through the midrashic intertextual network, the reader can uncover the narrator's critical tone when he settles scores with life in a dual consciousness, that is, with the schizophrenic life led by Mordecai the Jewish courtier.

More than two thousand years separate the text of the book of Esther, which was written during the lifetime of the first Judean exiles, and Agnon's story. In the interim, 'the wandering Jew' became a European prototype: cursed and homeless, the eternal guest who needs the grace and favor of a hostile environment. Joseph the Peddler is no more than a faded and worn type of 'Joseph the Righteous'. Thousands of years after the story of Joseph in Egypt, the exiled Jew lost his uniqueness, and the erotic attraction between two opposite poles becomes cannibalistic. Supplementary evidence from the point of view of the Christian 'other' is revealed in the subtext of Ingmar Bergman's film, *The Touch*. Bergman describes the Jewish world as declining and decadent, and the Jewish protagonist as filled with destructive self-hate. In the end, after the Jewish protagonist has crossed the border he is unable to put down roots in the foreign territory, and he remains manacled to his 'Sarah', to the compulsive and obsessive brother–sister relationship.

The stories in Genesis represents isolationism out of choice. This decision apparently derives from the need to define self-identity as opposed to other identities in the pagan cultural context. Agnon's 'The Lady and the Peddler', and perhaps Bergman's cinematic work, take the reader and the spectator from the pole of isolationism out of choice to isolation imposed on the Jew from the outside, anti-Semitic isolation. Even when it is secular, Christian Europe preserves within it as a subtext the fear of the Jew, who is simultaneously a foreigner and flesh of the flesh of Christianity. It is precisely when the exiled Jew attempts to integrate into European society, and joyously reacts to emancipation's cry

for liberty that he finds himself trapped with no way out: the source of his vitality diminishes, whereas the xenophobia directed at him by the European-Christian world increases in intensity.

In my opinion it is not surprising that Semadar Herzfeld—at the last port of this voyage in her novel *Inta Omri*—seeks to upset the apple cart. For Herzfeld the recurring pattern that binds the events of Jewish history to a predetermined one, and leads her protagonists into role play that has been played innumerable times by so many before them, is a genuine reason for revolt. The female narrator embarks on a stubborn struggle against the destructive force of tradition, a force she recognizes and from which she tries to free herself. In her opinion, the biblical pattern of 'us–them' relations, the pattern of the Jacob–Esau struggle according to the allegorical-mythical meaning given to it, imposes a distorted conceptualization of the reality, and the individuals in the role play, either voluntarily or involuntarily, lose any chance of a life shaped by a personal inner voice. But the attempt of the protagonist-narrator in Herzfeld's novel is doomed to failure. Semadar replaces the ancient allegorical structure with new images, and they create new ways of enslavement that impose themselves on the characters' psychological world. Semadar's fantasy about 'the East', just like Omar's about 'the West', are doomed to failure, and the lust for life, the stirring contact between a man and a woman, are replaced by a yearning for death.

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