

The “Aquatic Zionist” in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*

The dark comedy that is at the heart of Michael Chabon’s highly amusing yet deeply disturbing novel *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* projects the text’s and apparently the author’s ambivalence concerning all things Jewish and their intrinsic relationship with the concept of exile. In the *New York Times* book review appearing on Sunday April 29, 2007, Patricia Cohen notes that Michael Chabon uses the phrase the “Frozen Chosen” for the way that world Jewry describes those pioneers who made it to Alaska during World War II in Chabon’s fantasy of Jewish history. Chabon’s dystopia takes place in the real-life island of Sitka, Alaska, probably chosen because of its potentially Yiddish sounding name. There all similarity between the real Sitka and its dysfunctional imaginary counterpart comes to an end. The only other realistic aspect of the novel is that there was discussion in the US State Department of opening up Alaska in 1940 for European Jews who faced destruction at the hands of the Nazi regime. The Act was supported by then Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, but was defeated in Congress. An imaginary advantage of Chabon’s novel is that three million Jews who died in the Holocaust ended up in Alaska instead of meeting certain destruction. The bad news is that the so-called Republic of Israel only lasted a few months before being defeated by the Arab world. Many of the scattered took refuge in Alaska, yet as the novel opens the “Reversion” is about to take place, with the Jews once again being forced to abandon their homes and seek their fortunes elsewhere. The Jews were given sixty years to settle in Alaska, but their desire to achieve statehood or permanent resident status was never approved by the American government.

It seems that only the ultraorthodox community that rules the Island as a mafia gangland enterprise will have no trouble obtaining papers to move elsewhere. Sitka will be returned to the aboriginals and most of the Jews will be forced to leave. Their future is uncertain, as most residents have been unable to create a viable alternative to their lives in Alaska. Although much of the novel offers a comedic reading of life, it is ultimately a grim, frightening picture of what happens when Jews are both granted and not granted a state. There seems to be no solution for a people that has been unable to win its independence in the Middle East and has committed many errors of judgment, as it tries to manage its semi-autonomous state in Sitka.

The novel's general ambivalence towards Jews, Jewishness and a Jewish State has caused outrage among many of the critics, some of them extremely harsh with Chabon, if not decidedly irrational. Thus, for example, John Podhoretz claims that the author's ambivalence posits virulent anti-Zionism. In a bizarre interpretation, he manages to equate Chabon's so-called disdain for Israel with the novelist's "new-found passion for the half-Kenyan, half WASP Hawaiian-born Senator from Illinois. . . His [Chabon's] Obama is at least as much a fictional character as Kavalier or Clay." No less perturbed by the book is James Lewis in his review, "The Ultimate PC Novel":

There are no pleasant, constructive or even likeable human beings in this gigantic book, written by an American Leftwing atheistic Yiddishist, living, significantly, in Berkeley, California. There is no lively State of Israel in Chabon's imaginary world; there is no thriving American Jewry in the most prosperous and tolerant country on earth; the world of Christian Americans and other religions barely appears, and then only as cardboard cutouts. . . There is no love unspoiled by hate in this book.

Lewis indeed goes over the top when he notes that the book may be original, but that the same could be said of *Mein Kampf*. In a much more rational though extremely negative review, Ruth Wisse declares the novel's and author's ambivalence and perhaps contempt for the Jewish State. Writing in *Commentary*, Wisse discusses Chabon's "staged alienation" (John McWhorter's term) to turn a profit among the Jews: "Audiences pay good money to enjoy abuse at the hands of their own." As she views the novel,

which she claims perpetuates a poor excuse for proper Yiddish terms, it is a "deliberate and sustained act of provocation, tap[ping] deeply into Chabon's vein of irreverence by inventing...a Jewish territory and a half-borrowed, half made-up language to go with it" (5). But worse than that is the way Wisse views the novel's so-called message: "the intimacy he [Chabon] creates is, of course, the intimacy of exile, of powerlessness. Chabon's mock-Yiddish reinforces the sentimental stereotype of the Jew as a harmless refugee, one who does not threaten the peace of the world, or the peace of the Jews themselves, unless and until he fatally conspires to resettle the land of Israel...Messages – in this case, beware the Zionists bearing death – hardly come clearer than this" (4-6). I can only imagine that Chabon would be pleased to know that his novel inspires so much emotion, albeit negative.

I suspect that Chabon's ambivalence towards exile and a Jewish homeland is the root cause of the hostile reactions to his text. This feeling was crystallized when I read Shlomo Sand's *Invention of the Jewish People*, in which he argues that the exile of Jews from the holy land – as an entire group – may well be a creation myth to sustain the notion of a unified Jewish people throughout history. It is difficult for the invested to confront the mythological history of any nation; in that sense Sand and Chabon have something in common. Both in their own way force Jews to examine their feelings towards exile and the creation of the Jewish State.

Fascination with exile, as we all know, does not begin with Chabon or Sand. Arnold Eisen reminds us that in the beginning there was exile, as we can understand from a reading of Genesis (xi). Moreover, Eisen raises a question that is central to understanding Chabon's work: "What can it mean for Jews to come home, impelled by their tradition, if what they find and build there falls far short of the fulfillment stored up in every traditional promise of return? American Jews turn to the same sources for help in justifying and comprehending their own ambivalent relation to the center" (xii). Michael Chabon answers Eisen's question with a vengeance. What he finds lacking in the "promise of return" takes a central part in the plot he creates, both for the fictional Jewish settlement in Sitka and the "real" Republic of Israel, which is fictionally wiped off the map after a mere three months of existence. Nevertheless, this essay, while acknowledging that the authorial ambivalence towards Jewish exile and return is the prime mover

of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, will also demonstrate that the novel – through its glorification of exile – is an affirmation of Jewish life and thought.

The novel sees the world through a glass darkly because of the inevitable failure of the Jews as an independent people. No less problematic is the idea that the settlement the novel creates, supposedly representative of “the Jewish People,” is hardly that. For some strange reason, half the Jewish population, that of Sephardic and Mizrachi (oriental) origins, is ignored, as if those Jews had never gone to Israel and didn't exist. What exactly became of them when Alaska became the home to millions of Jews? How is it that the new Jewish homeland uses Yiddish – or Chabon's watered-down version of it – as its national language, effectively denying those Jews who speak Arabic or Ladino?

In her review of the novel, Erica Lipper informs us that “More than just vocabulary, Yiddish is the linguistic trademark of a diaspora [sic] people ever teetering between joy and sorrow, living in the space between.” I would amend that argument to note that what is true of Yiddish is also true of Ladino, the infusion of Castilian Spanish with Hebrew, Arabic, Greek and French that Sephardic Jews have spoken ever since their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Yiddish only represents part of that Diaspora people, yet the novel and the review assume that the Diaspora relates to Yiddish speakers only.

In Abigail Nussbaum's review of the book, she notes that Jew is often substituted for person, but this is not negative but rather universal because it refers to everyone in that geographical space. She claims that “For the residents of Sitka... substituting ‘Jew’ for ‘person’ isn't an act of exclusion but in fact its opposite – an address which remarks not on a differentiating quality but on a universal one. Jews are the same as people because all people are Jews.” Yet the universality she observes is actually a double disenfranchisement. All people of Sitka are not Jews because the aboriginal Tlingit Indians are living there as well. Moreover, the Jews are not universal but exclusionary, since they only account for those of Eastern European descent. While the novel makes hysterical if not always appropriate use of the Yiddish language to invent many wonderful words or applications, every Jew not of Ashkenazi or Eastern European origins – along with the Tinglits – is effectively present only by her absence.

That the novel is a dystopia, or at least a saga of failure and ambivalence, is evident from the first page of the hardboiled, "Chandlerian," detective frame story. ¹ Meyer Landsman, the fallen detective, must solve the murder of Mendel Shpilman, Tsadik Hador (in Hebrew and Yiddish) which means, approximately, the righteous one of his generation, who had the miraculous powers of a potential Messiah. Unlike that other young Jewish rabbi who performed miracles in the holy land two thousand years ago, ours is more of a fallen Messiah, one who couldn't face the pressure of being the son of the Verbover Rabbi, a great rabbinical authority and head of a powerful criminal enterprise. The Tsadik Hador, Shpilman, decides to escape from his responsibilities because as a gay youth he can't imagine acquiescing to an arranged marriage with a female. An alternative explanation is that he is unwilling or unable to accept the weight of the Jewish people's salvation as his "cross" to bear. Perhaps it is a combination of these circumstances, though I suspect that Mendel Shilman is wise enough to understand that once the possibility of Messiah is close to fruition it reverts to an impossible dream. Messiah is only possible when it is impossible. He realizes that Jews, unlike Christians, can never look forward to the actual coming of the Messiah and, in that sense, must always live in exile. Overwhelmed by this knowledge and his personal circumstances, our unwilling Messiah unfortunately finds his solace as a junkie addicted to heroin and abandons his father's house to disappear in the underworld.

The author's apparent ambivalence toward the idea of a Jewish state, which is a focal point of this novel, is well presented from the first page, when we are introduced to our down-and-out detective in the Hotel Zamenhof, named after the father of Esperanto who fantasized about saving the world from the miscommunication derived from multiple languages. The results of that project are well documented. All of the hotel signs, put up fifty years earlier, are in Esperanto, perhaps signifying the futility of the Jewish project as a whole.

The novel opens with a dead "Yid," or Jew, signed in as the chess great Emmanuel Lasker; he has been discovered in the flophouse with a bullet in his brain. Emmanuel is a fitting pseudonym, meaning, in Hebrew, God is with us. Indeed, this is one of the ways that Jesus is referred to in the New Testament. But there will be no mission of redemption for our would-be Jewish Messiah. He has been unwilling to take the sins of the world

upon his slight shoulders. If the job of Messiah is turned down by many, or accepted only by the unworthy, our floundering detective seems to audition for the part, though on a much smaller scale. He would like to get to the bottom of this murder, even though he is about to be out of a job in six weeks, once the Alaskan Reversion takes effect. Perhaps he identifies with the victim, another son who has disappointed his father and will never meet his expectations. It seems that Meyer Landsman is outraged that the Jews were deprived of their Messiah just when they most needed one. Whatever the reason, Landsman is deeply motivated to get to the truth. Like an ancient Hebraic interpreter of signs, a Jewish Phillip Marlowe, Landsman approaches his task with unexpected gusto.² Perhaps it is the case that will allow him to regain his interpretive powers and refashion his life. Landsman is the typical down-on-his luck hardboiled detective with an interesting twist. That is, his work has become meaningless except for the meaning that he decides to assign it. No one cares if he solves the whodunit; and a lot of powerful people would prefer that he didn't unravel the case at all.

Like all Jewish residents of Sitka, Meyer Landsman's native tongue is Yiddish and the reader is treated to delectable inventions in the language to describe all kinds of people and artifacts. In fact, Landsman's last name means compatriot, family member, or member of the tribe in Yiddish, signifying his connection to the murder mystery he stumbles upon.³ The piece he carries is known as a "sholem," peace in Yiddish and similar to Shalom, peace in Hebrew, a kind of Jewish-cowboy peacemaker. His cell phone is known as a "shoyfar," which is a ram's horn, a communicative instrument that is part of the Yom Kippur ritual. A true "Sitkanik," Meyer is the most decorated "shames," or detective, in Sitka's history, but since he has decided to abort his and his wife's potentially genetically deficient fetus, Django, as he painfully refers to him, and has suffered the consequences of a guilt-ridden subsequent divorce, he has become a dysfunctional alcoholic.

Landsman is not only fascinated by the murder, but also by the chess problem left behind on a paper board in the victim's room. Landsman's father was a champion chess player, which is one of the reasons that our detective hates the game. Yet Landsman and his partner, Shemets, must solve not only a murder but also a chess conundrum—which are intimately connected.

The chess problem, as will later become apparent, is indicative of the impossibility of Messiah, the State of Israel, and perhaps the impossibility of the novel. The problem, as Landsman eventually discovers, creates the situation known as *Zugzwang* in chess. The latter is "a situation in which a player is limited to moves that cost pieces or have a damaging positional effect" (*Dictionary*). But the practical result of *Zugzwang* is much worse. Every move a player makes can only lead to defeat. The player is literally forced to move, albeit through his own volition, toward a position of checkmate. Thus, there is no correct move and a skilled chess player, once recognizing *Zugzwang*, will concede the game rather than drag out the inevitable defeat. This seems to serve as a metaphor for the authorial voice's view of a Jewish homeland. Exile and the resettlement of the land both lead to political *Zugzwang*. To establish a state had been impossible in the Holy Land and the efforts to transfer the state to Sitka are also about to end in failure. But the detective Chabon has created will not accept this position. He will do his utmost to arrive at some sort of satisfactory solution, despite the harsh reality he must face, whether it is with the chess board, the murder investigation, or the upcoming removal of the Jews from Alaska.

In his noble efforts to solve the case, Landsman encounters an old Jewish bum named Elijah, collecting coins for the reestablishment of the nation of Israel. During the traditional Passover gathering a glass of wine is poured at the table for the Prophet of Israel, Elijah, who is expected to return one day to announce the coming of the Messiah. Landsman's Elijah, a homeless man, may be collecting donations for the re-establishment of the State of Israel, but inspires little confidence in the viability of the project. As the narrator informs us,

The Holy Land has never seemed more remote or unattainable than it does to a Jew of Sitka. It is on the far side of the planet, a wretched place ruled by men united only in their resolve to keep out all but a worn fistful of small-change Jews. For half a century, Arab strongmen and Muslim partisans, Persians and Egyptians, socialists and nationalists and monarchists, pan-Arabists and pan-Islamists, traditionalists and the party of Ali, have all sunk their teeth into Eretz Yisroel (land of Israel) and worried it down to bone and gristle. Jerusalem is a city of blood and slogans

painted on the wall, severed heads on telephone poles. Observant Jews have not abandoned their hope to dwell one day in the land of Zion. But Jews have been tossed out of the joint three times now – in 586 BCE, in 70 CE, and with savage finality in 1948. It's hard even for the faithful not to feel a sense of discouragement about their chances of once again getting a foot in the door. (17)

While it is true that the narrative seems to disapprove of the project of statehood for the Jews, it is not with an unequivocal voice. In the above passage this “wretched” place is not merely suffering from the Jewish presence but also from a radical and nationalist Islam that has “sunk its teeth” into the land of Israel and “worried it down to bone and gristle.” The implication is that the holy land is overrun by extremists and that it is only the ultra-observant among Jews who would want to return. Perhaps the passage presents some kind of transference in the motivation to resettle the land. That is to say, it is psychologically easier to discuss the homeland desires of religious Jews than to acknowledge that the very same yearning for a state might apply to secular Jews as well. Perhaps it is embarrassing to want to have a state in a land that is in constant turmoil, a place where death seems to be worshiped no less, if not more, than life.

When Elijah tells him the Messiah is coming, thus implying that the historical state will be returned to the Jews, Detective Landsman hands him a twenty dollar bill, wishes him well, and: “‘that works out well,’ Landsman says jerking his thumb towards the hotel lobby. ‘As of tonight, we have a vacancy’” (18). Landsman has no patience for religion, especially not for his own. Indeed, the emptiness and hypocrisy of religious fervor also come under attack. Not only are the most religious Jews the crime bosses, but the barrenness of ritual is well portrayed in the way the junkie Messiah tied off his veins. He used the ritual phylacteries or tefillin, in Yiddish and Hebrew, to bring a vein to the surface of his pathetically skinny arms so that he can inject his heroin (23). Leather thongs that are used for daily prayer serve this junkie to get his fix, which is, to say the least, not an auspicious state of affairs for a would-be Messiah or his religion.

If there ever were a place for the Messiah to appear, Chabon's 21st-century Sitka seems to be ideal. Chaos and despair abound. The Jews have been defeated and are about to be removed from their temporary home-

land. In the fictional 1948, after the Republic of Israel collapses and is overrun by Arabs, Jews are slaughtered and driven into the sea. Sitka seems to be their last hope. Yet no “JewLaska, lawmakers promise,” but rather an interim period for Sitka as a federal district (29). It seems that no matter where Jews are given autonomy, trouble is unavoidable—seemingly in real life, but certainly in Chabon’s dystopia.

The upcoming Reversion is perhaps the darkest event of the novel. What greater nightmare could the author create than the dispersal of the Jews when no state is particularly willing to take them in? Indeed, the American officials responsible for carrying out the Reversion are known collectively as the “Burial Society” “to prepare the corpse for interment in the grave of history” (55).

Despite these grave events our detective is determined to see justice done. Landsman’s quest to discover the Messiah’s killer leads him to Verbover Island, a neighborhood completely dominated by the Verbover Rabbi and his mafia chieftains. Chabon seems to be criticizing the power of the religious orthodox Jews in Israel, which is not quite Mafioso-like, but certainly enjoys, because of the oddities of the parliamentary system, a disproportionate influence on Israeli politics and budgets. In Chabon’s imaginary world, the Verbovers not only serve as a religious sect, but also double as the most successful crime family in Alaska, if not in the world (103). When Landsman confronts a couple of body guards near the Rabbi’s house he realizes the futility of his mission:

Landsman pulls at his chin. Madness, he thinks. Chasing a theoretical lead in a non-existent case, you lose your temper for no reason. The next thing you know, you have caused an incident among a branch of black hats with clout, and a stockpile of Manchurian surplus and Russian firearms recently estimated by police intelligence, in a confidential report, to be adequate to the needs of a guerilla insurgency in a small Central American Republic. Madness, the reliable madness of Landsman. (103)

But we all desire closure, even if ironic, and Landsman is no exception. What better way to complete his career as a detective in a country soon to be lost than by solving a case that no one wants solved? What better tribute to the demise of his national existence than to get the job done just

because the opportunity presents itself? What better way to affirm Jewish life and thought than to act as if with power in a powerless situation? It is almost as if Landsman decided to play the role of secular Messiah, to do something uplifting in a time of need and despair.

The most nebulous of all Landsman's encounters in the novel – and perhaps the key to understanding it – is his meeting with Zimbalist, the so-called Boundary Maven, or he who understands boundaries and borders. The Boundary Maven specializes in setting up boundaries around the homes of people with rows of string so that they can carry out their illicit activities on the Sabbath, without, supposedly, breaking the mandate to rest on the Holy Day (110). Landsman is furious about this activity, blaming both man and God for what he views as a sham:

Landsman has put a lot of work into the avoidance of having to understand concepts like that of the eruv, but he knows that it's a typical Jewish ritual dodge, a scam run on God, that controlling motherfucker. It has something to do with pretending that telephone poles are doorposts, and that the wires are lintels. You can tie off an area using poles and strings and call it an eruv, then pretend on the Sabbath that this eruv you've drawn – in the case of Zimbalist and his crew, it's pretty much the whole District – is your house. That way you can get around the Sabbath ban on carrying in a public place, and walk to shul with a couple of Alka-Seltzers in your pocket, and it isn't a sin. Given enough string and poles, and with a little creative use of existing walls, fences, cliffs, and rivers, you could tie a circle around pretty much any place and call it an eruv. (110)

Understanding this passage is essential to understanding the novel's ambivalence towards Jews, Judaism, exile, Ashkenazi Jews and a Jewish State. Ultraorthodox religion has been reduced to a sham because of its apparent insistence on outsmarting God and avoiding his laws. It is yet another attempt to create a failed boundary between the believer and his or her home, state, or individual transgressions. It is also liminal, a boundary that sets off one world from another, though what the new world might be like is far from clear. Just as creating the boundaries of the real State of Israel has been unsuccessful so, too, is the attempt to rope in God, almost

literally, and have every manmade Sabbath activity declared “kosher.” If the Ashkenazi Jews are granted ethnic exclusivity in the novel, they also come under attack because they are the trickster lawmakers and dubious religious authority.

Though the Boundary Maven implies that Jews finally have boundaries, physical and mental, with which to function, just as the real-life current State of Israel is involved in its own volatile quest for recognized boundaries, still the omniscient narrator highlights the futility of such an endeavor. In the last analysis, the Boundary Maven and his followers are only fooling themselves into thinking they behave appropriately on the day of rest.

Questioned by Landsman, the Boundary Maven is able to recognize the photo of the deceased; it's Mendel Shpilman, authorially named so as to call attention to the so-called Jewish Messiah, Menachem Mendel Shneerson, the real-life (or after-life) Rabbi of Lubavitch (117). A replica of his house in Brooklyn has been exactly recreated on a plot of land near Ben-Gurion Airport, waiting for his return from the dead. Perhaps the proximity to the airport indicates that the Messiah will one day fly into the country. The Boundary Maven explains that as a child Shpilman showed signs of genius, with an IQ of 170, mastering numerous languages and displaying a chess prodigy's mastery of the game (117). The narrator notes that most miraculous of all, Mendel, even as a young child, understood the messiness of human life:

The older Mendel got – the more dazzling his feats of scholarship, the brighter his reputation for acumen beyond his years – the more painful this waste appeared. It was not just Mendel's memory, the agile reasoning, the grasp of precedent, history, law. No, even as a kid, Mendel Shpilman seemed to intuit the messy human flow that both powered the Law and required its elaborate system of drains and sluices. Fear, doubt, lust, dishonesty, broken vows, murder and love, uncertainty about the intentions of God and men, little Mendel saw all of that not only in the Aramaic abstract but when it appeared in his father's study, clothed in the dark serge and juicy mother tongue of everyday life. If conflicts ever arose in the boy's mind, doubts about the relevance of the Law that he was learning in the Verbover

court at the feet of a bunch of king-sized ganefes [thieves] and crooks, they never showed. Not when he was a kid who believed, and not when the day came that he turned his back on it all. He had the kind of mind that could hold and consider contradictory positions without losing its balance. (121)

Yet his ability to understand these “contradictory positions” did not enable him to accept the unacceptable: to play the part of the Jewish redeemer. Mendel as Messiah echoes and mirrors the positions of the real-life State of Israel, Chabon’s imaginary temporary Jewish homeland of Sitka Alaska, and the chess problem that is Mendel’s parting message to the world. Every move that one makes in all these settings forces one into a bad place. There seems to be no appropriate strategy for coming out ahead. So although the text is ambivalent about the idea of a state for Jews and Jewish exile, there is also more than a tinge of regret about such complex existential realities. In the real-life state, the latest manifestation of impossible existence is the war in Gaza. This novel was published before the war, but it expresses the frustration of the dynamic before its latest outburst. Although the reality on the ground is much more complex than I will present it, Israel, aside from its obvious excesses, felt required to make a choice about privileging human life: whose children are more important, yours or mine? In the land of Sitka the terms of existence are, by definition, impossible. How can a people thrive when they know that their existence as a nation is under severe time constraints, the nation’s demise scheduled in advance? How could they develop as an autonomous entity without impinging on the rights of the native Alaskans? And how can a Jewish Messiah accept his role, understanding full well that the moment he is declared Messiah he can no longer accept the burdens of the world on his shoulders? Finally, how can even a chess prodigy escape the constraints of *Zugzwang*, which demands that one move towards one’s own destruction?

The would-be Messiah, we are informed, was born on the 9th day of the Hebrew month Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the holy Temple (195). This suggests that he, too, was fated to fail, on the way to his own destruction from the day he was born: a life of *Zugzwang*, so to speak. He is unwilling to fulfill anyone’s expectations, especially those of his family, and not even his own. Thus, Mendel runs away from his wedding dis-

guised as a woman. His father sees him as a “freak, an aberration” and blames his wife for the results (219).

Exactly what tortures Mendel is probably a conglomerate of issues. It might be his gayness, having the world on his shoulders, the hypocrisy of his rabbi-gangster father, or the impossibility of being alive and a Messiah or all of the above. As the narrator explains it:

The Tzaddik Ha-Dor (the righteous one of a generation) was tendering his resignation. He could not be what the world and its Jews, in the rain with their heartaches and their umbrellas, wanted him to be, what his mother and father wanted him to be. He could not even be what he wanted himself to be. She (his mother) hoped – sitting there, she prayed – that one day, at least, he might find a way to be what he was. (226)

Suspended from duty and armed with only his pathetic union card, the Yiddish Policemen’s Union, Landsman doggedly pursues the investigation he has been ordered to shut down. All of the various and tangential aspects of the case, including his sister Naomi’s supposed accidental death after she flew the Messiah to a rehabilitation facility, are connected to the futility of the Zionist project:

It was from an early boyfriend that she had caught the itch to fly. Landsman never asked her what the attraction was, why she had worked so long and hard to get her commercial license and crash the homoidiotic world of male bush pilots. She was not one for pointless speculation, his dashing sister. But as Landsman understands it, the wings of an airplane are engaged in a constant battle with the air that envelops them, denting and baffling and warping it, bending and staving it off. Fighting it the way a salmon fights against the current of the river in which it’s going to die. Like a salmon, that aquatic Zionist, forever dreaming of its fatal home – Naomi used up her strength and energy in struggle. (238)

Naomi’s flying, Shpilman’s messianic tendencies, a search for a homeland, and Landsman’s desire to detect and live a meaningful life, all seem

reduced to the same impossibility that a salmon discovers while swimming upstream, attempting to fulfill the role of an “aquatic Zionist.” Indeed, according to the text, perhaps all Zionists are like salmon: they swim upstream, try to accomplish the impossible and are launched on a path to certain death. Yet the text informs these endeavors with nobility, which is in itself an affirmation of Jewish life and thought.

Despite all obstacles, in his own small world Landsman is able to create a coherent if not particularly satisfying chain of events. He stumbles upon the Beth Tikkun Retreat (the house of repair), which is either a rehab facility for junkies or a training station preparing for the Messiah and reconquest of Israel or both (249). Landsman seemingly accidentally discovers the shady plots of the Verbovers, guarding their genetically manipulated red heifer, which now has a white spot. That is how the red heifer must appear if it is to be appropriate for the sacrifice at the new Temple in Jerusalem, which the Verbovers believe they are destined to rebuild. They do have a slight problem to overcome, however, as they must blow up the mosque known as the Dome of the Rock, which supposedly sits on the temple site (276, 295). Unfortunately, towards the novel’s end fanatics do succeed in blowing up the mosque, suggesting that Jewish fanaticism is every bit as poisonous as its Muslim counterpart. And if Jews can be such fanatics, the novel seems to ask if they are worthy of statehood at all. It is ironic, however, that other peoples and nations are rarely required to answer that question.

Landsman also discovers that his sister was killed by the Americans to safeguard their plot to remove the Arab presence from Jerusalem, the idea having found particular favor with the “imaginary” American fundamentalist president at the time. This “make believe” administration is interested in returning the Jews to the Temple Mount so that the Messiah can come. Of course, they also believe that on the last day all the Jews will accept Christ as their savior. Their Jewish fanatical partners are willing participants in the plot, though their plans for the final day are very different.

In a tidy conclusion, Landsman and Berko (his Jewish-Indian cousin and partner) learn who killed the Messiah as well as the secret of Berko’s Indian mother’s death: “Berko calls his wife. He explains to her, not very coherently, that his father and a man named Alter Litvak were indirectly

responsible for his mother’s death during the worst Indian-Jew violence in the sixty-year history of the District, and that his father had shot himself in the head (after he admitted shooting the would-be Messiah to put him out of his misery)” (320).

At the novel’s end, Landsman notes that “every Jew has a personal Messiah who never comes,” a declaration that well fits Chabon’s authorial voice (331). Indeed, perhaps this best sums up the novel, though the fact that Jewish religious fanatics are responsible for the destruction of a holy shrine in Jerusalem doesn’t make the Jews look very good. Or perhaps they are merely mirroring the role of Hamas, since the shoe is on the other foot, so to speak. Conqueror is conquered; winner is loser; and all oppressed people are capable of great cruelty and fanaticism. It seems that Chabon has created a *Great Gatsby* for the Jews. We recall the narrator of *Gatsby* imagining that green, virgin land that the Dutch sailors first saw on their voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. At that pristine moment, we are led to believe, everything was perfect and everything was possible in America. But there has never been true virgin land or perfect opportunity in America. The latter is true for the Jews of Sitka and of Israel; it is even so for the coming of the Messiah: indeed, as the text informs us, “A Messiah who actually arrives is no good to anybody. A hope fulfilled is already half a disappointment” (349). Put quite simply, “*Every Messiah fails...the moment he tries to redeem himself*” (335). Perhaps that is why Mendel Shpilman wanted to die, to avoid such a defeatist position, mirrored in the *Zugzwang* chess problem he left behind.

Once Landsman unravels the whodunit, he decides to make the most of the situation. Although as secular messiah he cannot redeem his people, he is able to protect his immediate family. Since he knows about the American plot to remove the Muslim presence from Jerusalem, he has the means to trade his silence to the American government for papers for his extended family. He secures documents for Berko, his wife and kids, and papers for his reconciled ex and himself (367). Justice, with a twist, is the best he can do. He opts for love with his wife Bina, the boundaries of his redemption reduced to the area of the wedding canopy. His salvation will not depend on the Messiah, nationhood or anything else (411). Apparently Landsman believes the borders of love, without a Boundary Maven, are more manageable and much more honest than the types of borders that burden the Jews,

existential, religious and secular. Optimistically, the novel ends with Landsman calling a long time acquaintance reporter, and letting him know: “Brennan...have I got a story for you” (411). Beyond the conundrum of statehood, telling good stories is the essence of being a Jew: for Landsman and perhaps for Michael Chabon as well.

What is most interesting about this story, however, is that it portrays such an ambivalent attitude towards the notion of a Jewish state and what it means to be Jewish. The alternative reality that Chabon creates is representative of failure on at least three levels: the so-called Republic of Israel is destroyed after a few months in 1948; the Reversion will remove the Jewish presence from Sitka; and the Non-Ashkenazi Jews, a majority in Israel of the 21st century, have disappeared. Nevertheless, I cannot help but acknowledge something optimistic about Chabon’s struggle with exile and ambivalence vis-à-vis the Jewish people.

Franz Rosenzweig has noted that exile is an integral part of Jewish existence. Writing in 1972, he declares that “The events which have dictated the terms of Jewish existence in our generation – Holocaust and Statehood – have had an especially profound effect upon recent Israeli reflection concerning the meaning of Jewish homelessness and homecoming” (*Star of Redemption* 117). In that respect, nothing much has changed over the past thirty-eight years, and what Rosenzweig says about Israelis is true about Jewish Americans as well. Jewish homelessness and homecoming, exile, statehood, and redemption are still critical issues that Jews must engage. I find no reason to fault Michael Chabon for creating such a wildly entertaining, engaging, and noble effort to do so.

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Notes

¹For a discussion of the “Chandlerian” prose, see Elizabeth McCracken’s review of the novel in the *Washington Post*, May 13, 2007. For the grim reality of the book, and its similarity in that respect to Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, see “Raymond Chandler on Ice,” the *Guardian*, June 9 2007. Cal Godot describes the novel as “a sort of Saul Bellow meets Raymond Chandler.”

²Michiko Kakutani describes Landsman as “one of the most appealing detective heroes to come along since Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe.”

³The perfect hilarious exemplification of the term occurs in *Frisco Kid* (1979) when “Rabbi” Gene Wilder mistakenly assumes a group of Amish are indeed his Landsmen because of the way they dress.

⁴I take issue with Sam Anderson’s *New York Magazine* review of the novel; he argues that “Anyone looking for a precise political allegory hidden in this backwoods American Diaspora won’t have an easy time. Chabon seems more interested in his alternate world as a novelistic challenge – how to bring something so outlandish to life? – than some kind of subtly coded analysis of contemporary Middle Eastern politics.” Were fundamentalists on all sides to have their way, Middle Eastern politics might well be as explosive as they are portrayed in the novel.

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