

"A Little Child Shall Lead Them":
The Jewish Family Romance
 From SAMUEL to CALL IT SLEEP

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This essay is dedicated to my son Danny, Daniel Shalom Sclan Berman, born 24 June 1994. While I was writing, sitting at my desk through the nights, he was on my chest in a baby carrier called a sling. Was he asleep or awake? I wanted to know, but it was hard to tell. His eyes were open much of the time, but his amazing serenity made me call it sleep. I could feel him as I wrote, and he helped.

One of the ways Jews stay together is by telling stories. The Bible is the world's most spectacular treasury of stories. Our seasonal rituals are pegged to the activities of telling, hearing, and interpreting stories. Our Talmudic tradition is a body of metastories, stories about stories. Our great modern intellectuals—Spinoza, Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Freud, Einstein, Kafka, Proust, Wittgenstein, and more—have blessed and cursed the world with more grand stories and metastories. Their achievements build on a dense, complex, and psychically rich Jewish culture of narration. We tell each other stories, listen to them, and turn them over and change them around till they fit us. We look for new and better ways to tell them, though sometimes we mask our creativity by saying we're only looking for a new way to tell it the old way. We tell them to the world and hope the world will love us, but we know the world will digest our stories in its own way, and respond with mixtures of love and hate that we can't control, and we hope those mixtures won't blow us up.

One form of story that Jews tell well is the "family romance," a story in which basic family relationships—husband and wife, parent and child, older and younger siblings, older and younger generations, people inside and outside the family—are loaded with metaphysical intensity, and are felt to form the ultimate core of being. In Jewish stories, starting with the Bible, family relationships are intensely dramatized, fraught with tension and crisis, animated by transgression and betrayal, driven by some inner momentum toward a resolution, which is typically a change in the nature of the family. The typical subject of the Christian story, the solitary soul confronting (or seeking) God, is rare in Jewish culture; Jewish happiness is

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typically family happiness. One important quality of Sigmund Freud's Oedipal triangle is that it is a Jewish family romance.

The family romance, wherever it thrives in the world, serves as a matrix for some of the primary conflicts in human life: between sizes, small versus big people; between ages, young people versus old; between generations, children versus adults; between classes, propertied and rich versus propertyless and poor; between ethnicities, "our people" versus the rest of the world. The family romance enables people to locate themselves in the world, to grow up to be somebody, to achieve identities.

There is a special type of family romance, where a person tells himself (or herself) that the people who have brought him up aren't his "real" parents, that his real parents are "others," greater and more exalted, that his real home is elsewhere, and that a grand mysterious destiny awaits him, if only he has the brains to recognize it and the guts to fight for it. This promissory (and often migratory) romance animates Jewish history, from the sojourn in Egypt and the earliest legends of Abraham and Joseph and Moses, to the mass migrations of the last century, still going on today.

It is hard to tell, or even to think about telling, a story that starts three thousand years ago and stops today. There are vast historical and anthropological differences between the biblical stories in the first part of this paper and the contemporary novels in the second; we need to read in different ways. Still, there are striking continuities in Jewish experience from ancient to modern times, and I want to bring some of them to light. There really is a *Jewish identity* that goes back a long way, but remains alive and well and ready for a future. Much of this identity is rooted in the call and response of storytelling. I want to examine some of the big stories below.

The family romances I explore in detail here focus on the development of male identity, from Second Samuel's story of King David to Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep*. But similar themes can be found in Jewish women's stories of growing up, from the Book of Ruth to Anzia Yezeirska's *Hungry Hearts* to Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa*.

The Nazi project of genocide engendered thousands of emergency metamorphoses for boys and girls alike: from 1939 to 1945, family romance became a matter of life and death. Many metamorphosed children survived, and became creators of Jewish culture after 1945. (One survived and became the Archbishop of Paris.) This essay is not about their desperate world, the world of *The Painted Bird* and *Tzili*. It is set in relatively normal times and places, where Jews often live precariously but their very survival is not in doubt. Even when Jewish life is "normal," family romance is a crucial theme: it is about the fluid and volatile boundaries between ourselves and the *goyim*, the rest of the world; it helps us to define who we are, and to deal with the existential problems inherent in being us.

The Biblical Dialectic: Israel Grows, Shrinks, Grows

Jewish family romances are, and must be, shaped by the peculiarities of Israel's history. The Covenant between God and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the others promises that the children of Israel will be as numerous as the sand on the sea and the stars in the sky. And the evil Pharaoh in Exodus 1 was said to believe that "the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us." But for all the rest of Jewish history, it has been only too clear that Israel is demographically small and not likely to get much bigger. Whether or not Jews have a state of our own, we know that whatever we have will be small. Even when we grow up, we are going to stay small. (Maybe this is why Jews, from Biblical times [2 Samuel 24] to today, have always resisted attempts at an ethnic census.) We have been a small people, either subsumed or surrounded by giant empires which have the power to annihilate us. This predicament has tipped our collective awareness and empathy, and our sentimentality, toward the small, the young, the child. Conflicts of size, age, and generation drive the great dramatic myths in the Book of Genesis—Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers—and drive Israel's history forward. The God of Israel is typically portrayed as one who looks with special favor on the small against the large and the young against the old. God's promise that "the elder shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23) is made again and again and again.

The figure of David is one of the most compelling in the Bible, in part because we see him in many phases of the human life cycle, and we see him grow. The Book of Samuel first presents him to us as "Little David." Like the Jack-the-giant-killer youths in world folklore, he defeats Goliath because he is smarter and more resourceful. The author of Samuel suggests that God has a special fondness for those who are young and small but brave and smart, and that somehow these qualities symbolize the Jewish people as a whole, a people that can triumph over its physical limitations. One more Davidic quality takes on heavy counter-physical weight: sensitivity. David's musicality and soulfulness can soothe Saul's soul and drive away his inner demons (1 Samuel 16:14-22). And the Bible seems to consider him worthy of political power precisely because he does not seek it or want it. David, "the younger," is supposed to be not only a rival of Saul, "the elder," but qualitatively better. His ascendancy is supposed to represent a leap forward for the whole people.

At the same time, though, the Books of Samuel portray David in terms that are typical of ancient warrior epics: "Saul has slain his thousands," the people are said to sing, "but David his tens of thousands" (1, 18:7, 21:11, 29:5). In other words, like a typical warrior hero—Gilgamesh, Achilles, Beowulf—he can kill people on a large scale without worrying or holding

back. The priests condemn King Saul because he merely commits mass murder against Amalek, but refrains from genocide (1 Samuel 15); but they have no worries about David. By the time he is anointed as king (2 Samuel 5), he has changed from a distinctive "little David" into a typical warrior "big man." Israel, too, has changed, from a small and vulnerable people into a triumphal nation that, in the Middle East, for a little while at least, is Number One.

The biblical account of David and his reign offers one of the rare visions in Jewish history of a sequence of "healthy" development, where small turns "naturally" into large. But this course of growth is ruptured and almost wrecked, first by the scandal that arises from the king's murderous love for Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12), and then by the revolt and death of his dearest son Absalom (14-19). It is hard to tell from the narrative just what Absalom's tragic rebellion is about. There is much detail about how this father and son came to the point of killing each other, but no explanation of why. They may be caught up in the chronic conflict between North and South: fifty years after David's death, this broke up the state forever (2 Samuel 20:1-2; 1 Kings 12). Or Absalom may be trapped in a kind of repetition-compulsion of David's own coup d'état against Saul. For a young, handsome, charismatic general in a state whose political institutions are fragile, the pressures could be irresistible to make his move, to blow away the old authority. Absalom's move even has a divine sanction: isn't God supposed to make the elder serve the younger (Genesis 23:25)? David's lament, "O my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you!" (2 Samuel 18:33-19:8), may be so heartbreaking because in the son he has killed, the father recognizes himself.

In the Bathsheba story David at first exhibits typical "big man" behavior, but then transcends himself. From his palace roof (above) he sees her in the distance (below), a lovely naked woman taking a bath. He wants her and, as the king, he takes for granted his right to have anybody he wants. "So David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her" (2 Samuel 11:4). This woman and her soldier husband Uriah are *klayne menshen* next to the king. Before long, Bathsheba gets pregnant, Uriah gets publicly angry, and David gets rid of him, by arranging to deploy him in combat where he will be killed. Bathsheba mourns, but she moves: she comes to the palace and becomes one of the king's wives. At this point, the prophet Nathan denounces David as a murderer, and warns that, because of the crimes he has committed to get that woman, "the sword shall never depart from your house." A Jewish prophet can't arrest a king, but he can create a scandal that will sap the king's legitimacy.

The tragedy heightens and deepens. Bathsheba gives birth, but after a week's illness her baby dies—"the Lord struck the child," the biblical

narrator says. While the baby is ill, David mortifies himself, fasts, and sleeps on the ground, in the hope of appeasing God's wrath. But once the baby is dead, he washes and anoints himself, puts on new clothes, and asks for fresh food. The servants are shocked, but David says angrily, "Can I bring him back again?" Biblical kings often fall to pieces when they are faced with disaster, especially when prophets are blaming them. But even though David's child is dead—killed by God, he believes—he is determined to live. "Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and went in to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And the Lord loved him" (12:24).

David's first sexual encounter with Bathsheba was portrayed as a form of recreation, but also of domination, a sign that as the king he could have any woman in the kingdom. But now their sexual life is charged with new meanings. In the face of death, it is a way to grasp life. Sex also becomes a form of comfort, balm for a soul in deep distress. Actually, both their souls are in distress, but Bathsheba's has got to be deeper here. She has just lost her child, her lover has killed her husband, she is alone in the king's palace, and her dependence on him is total. Meanwhile, he is being denounced in the streets for his liaison with her, and there is no child to legitimize her and hold his love. If King David has spin doctors, they are surely telling him she is a liability and he should get rid of her fast. Instead, to his glory, he does the right thing. The "comfort" that David brings is *nechama*, the Hebrew word that signifies one of the prime rewards that God bestows on Israel: "Comfort, comfort, my people" (Isaiah 40:1); "When the cares of my heart are many/thy comforts delight my soul" (Psalm 94:19). The spiritual exaltation which the Bible sees in the relationship between God and Israel is embodied here in the activity of a man and a woman in bed. After the sadness they have been through, and the external pressure they are under, sex reaffirms them as a couple. Sex is the continuous factor in the David-Bathsheba story, but it gets spiritualized in the course of the story. It becomes a way to choose life against death, and a way to express love beyond expediency. What began as recreational sex has developed into something like sacred marriage.¹ This may explain why the Bible allows a love affair that is both adulterous and murderous to engender not only Israel's wisest king but also what the Bible tells us is Israel's golden age.

If we jump-cut and pick up these themes in the prophetic age, we find ourselves in a world where Israel's bid for imperial glory is gone with the wind. The basic fact of life now, roughly between 750 and 700 BCE, is the gulf between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel—which both separately and together are quite small and about to get smaller—and the neighboring Assyrian empire to the north, which is overwhelmingly big and about to get even bigger, partly at Israel's expense. In this context, the prophet Amos

emerges and tries to start a dialogue both with the people and with God. His dramatic encounter with God comes at 7:1–6, about two thirds of the way through his book. It begins with God notifying Amos that he is preparing a series of deadly plagues to use against Israel, first locusts, then fire. God gives the prophet a vivid preview of the mass destruction and death he is about to bring down. Up to now, Amos has been denouncing Israel for a wide variety of sins, from idol worship to violation of the sabbath to oppression of the poor to incest. It seems we are meant to think that God has got the message, and the impending horror is his revenge. The idea of divine plagues also evokes folk memories of Pharaonic Egypt, and sounds a theme that the prophets will often repeat: Israel has become as evil as its worst oppressor. But suddenly Amos seems to recoil in horror from his own dread vision. It is as if a man who has had a splendid career as a prosecutor, and gone so far as to convict his own people, has sudden second thoughts when they are actually on Death Row; he recoils on the eve of the death sentence that he himself has demanded, and strives desperately to get through to the highest authority to make an appeal on their behalf. Twice he intercedes and implores God to have *rachmones*, take pity. The basis for his appeal is a fact that must have been on everybody's mind in eighth-century Israel, but that (so far as I know) commentators have never connected with the prophetic critique. Once the fact is cited, though, its relevance is obvious. What Amos says to God is, "How can Jacob stand? He is so small!"

Amos's question to God embodies a classic strategy in criminal defense: not to deny the defendant's criminal acts, but to claim that he has been driven to them because he is a victim of past abuse. What makes this strategy particularly audacious here is Amos's suggestion that the abuse was committed by God himself: he charged Israel with world-historical responsibilities, but he failed to give it the means, the power and autonomy that it would need to fulfill these ends. As Amos imagines it, this argument brings God up short: at once he relents and cancels his death sentence: "It shall not be." This is one of the great biblical moments where a human being confronts God and forces him to change. The biblical archetype may be Cain's argument about saving his life (in Genesis 4), or Abraham's about saving the city of Sodom (in Genesis 18). Amos believes that once God has heard his voice, he will concede the human point at once, and will accept responsibility for having made Israel chronically, and irreversibly, too small. Amos hears God assure him, in effect, that he won't try this child in adult court, alongside giants like the Assyrians or the Egyptians; he will *hab'rachmones*, take pity, and make sure Israel lives. It isn't only that he will protect the people from the imperial predators that are threatening them; at least as important, he will protect them from himself.

So God promises Israel that it won't be destroyed, it won't die; but its life is going to be permanently precarious and problematical. It may hold onto political power, but there will be far less of it than in its Davidic and Solomonic heyday, and it will be far more subject to the incessant crossfire and convulsion of the great powers that surround it. Or it may lose political identity entirely, and be forced to bear the anguish of exile. In any case, it will have to learn to live small.

In this dark time, our prophets make a great creative leap, and invent a new meaning for Israel, a meaning that is still an important part of our concept of "Jewish identity." At a moment when it is clear that Israel has failed as a great power, Israel instead will become the force that sees through great-power politics. The prophetic political vision is a form of world peace that doesn't dissolve national existence—as the multinational empires of the Middle East were always trying to dissolve it—but that lives in a world of nations who recognize each other's right to live, and recognize that the earth has room for them all.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. . . .
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

. . .
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall feed;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The sucking child shall play over the asp's hole,
and the weaned child will put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord,
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 2:3–4; 11:6–9)

Precisely because "Jacob is so small," the prophets believe, "a little child shall lead them." The physical limitations that make Israel a failure as a great power will make it a success as a different kind of power. Ancient Middle Eastern politics seem to have been ruled (as were pre-First World War politics) by the paradigm of a biological food chain; here Israel tells the world

that human beings can overcome the zero-sum stark inevitabilities of this model of life.

The prophetic movement marked a break in world culture. Israel was on the verge of fading away—just as dozens, maybe hundreds of other peoples in the ancient Middle East would fade away. But at the moment when it seemed there was no place in the world for Israel, Israel presented the world with a new idea of place, far more expansive and inclusive than the Middle East's deserts and ravines. As the prophetic vision spread, there got to be more room for the Jews. It wasn't simply that they could be legitimately recognized under the new rules: they got special recognition for inventing the new rules. (We have to add that some of the recognition was negative: the vision of Isaiah is radically threatening to those who embrace the warrior morality of the *Iliad* and who want to beat their plowshares into swords.) One minute, the Jews were being ripped to pieces by conflicts with their neighbors, with each other, with God; the next minute—or was it the same minute?—they were offering the whole world a vision that purported to heal conflict between anyone and anyone else. Thus a people forced to live small could extend its life and expand its being by learning to think big.

Modern Times: The Subjective Family Romance

If we make a leap in time, from the biblical to the modern era, we will find Jews still forced to live small, and still searching for new ways to see and think big. But there are important differences. Modern Jews are citizens of national states, and beneficiaries of a social policy that the nineteenth century called "Jewish Emancipation." It is impossible to explain Emancipation on one foot, but it will help if we consider the 1791 debates in the French National Assembly, two years after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, on the issue of rights for religious and ethnic minorities. Some members opposed rights for Jews on the grounds that they were an inexorably separate "nation within the nation." The view that prevailed, however, was that of the radical Deputy Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, who said: "One should refuse everything to the Jews as a nation, but one must give them everything as individuals; they should become citizens."² The crucial words here are "as individuals" and "become citizens." One of the central forces in modern history has been the mass desire for what Thomas Jefferson called "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Emancipation created a framework in which Jews, without ceasing to be Jews, could express themselves "as individuals," explore and enjoy individual liberty, pursue their own individual roads to happiness, and, by "becoming citizens," participate actively in modern public life. Hegel, trying to explain this public life philosophically, said: "*The principle of the modern world*

is freedom of subjectivity."³ So many of the men and women who have created modern Jewish culture have been explorers of the most intense subjectivity. But it is usually a blocked, trapped, anguished subjectivity tortured by internal contradictions. A subjectivity that can say to itself, as Kafka said in his diary, "How can I have anything in common with Judaism? I hardly have anything in common with myself."⁴ Jewish subjects have had little chance to stretch and evolve into citizens, because not the liberal republics of the modern West or the revolutionary U.S.S.R. or the State of Israel have even begun to fulfill their civic promise.

When Freud wrote his landmark essay "Family Romances" in 1909, he was talking in the language of modern subjectivity.⁵ It is a type of fantasy widely held by neurotics, he said, but also by "all comparatively highly gifted people." The fantasy "emerges first in children's play, and then, starting in the period roughly before puberty, takes over the topic of family relations." It surges up in dreams and in daydreams: "the child's imagination becomes engaged in getting free from the parents . . . and of replacing them by others, occupying, as a rule, a higher social station." The subject imagines that he (or she) is really "a stepchild or an adopted child," that the people who have brought him up are not his real parents. Sometimes it's the father who's a fraud, sometimes the mother, sometimes both. The "real" parents may be landed proprietors, aristocrats, the Lord of the Manor, even the Emperor; the basic principle is that the child's "parents are replaced by others of better birth." As the child grows older, "learns about sexual processes," and "tends to picture to himself erotic situations and relations," the romance takes on a sharply sexual focus. Although Freud says (rightly, I think) that both sexes go through the family romance, his detailed account is almost entirely male. The growing boy now "desires to bring [his] mother, who is the subject of the most intense sexual curiosity, into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love affairs." The more ardently he idealized her before, the more luridly he portrays her now; he "has no hesitation in attributing to his mother as many secret love affairs as he himself has competitors." These mental and emotional processes—the demonization of the mother, the reincarnation of the self as an "other"—are likely to be intensely painful, for both the child himself and the family of his romance. Nevertheless, the family romance enables the growing child to separate inwardly from his parents:

The freeing of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of human development. It is quite essential that this liberation should occur. . . . Indeed, the whole progress of society rests on the opposition between successive generations.

In other words, every one of us has got to go through the pain of a family romance in order to free ourselves from our family. If we do go through it, we can come out the other end and grow into modern "free subjectivity," and furthermore we can help bring about the "progress of society." But if Jacob doesn't wrestle, he can't become Israel.

Call It Sleep: Romance on the Lower East Side

The family romance I want to discuss is Henry Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep*. Since the 1960's, students of American literature have recognized this radiant lyrical novel as one of the great works of fiction of the twentieth century. Its historical context is the great migration of Eastern European Jews to the U.S.A., which began in 1881, when the Czarist government sponsored a wave of pogroms, and lasted till 1924, when the U.S. Congress closed the gates. Its world is the immigrant ghetto that developed in very late nineteenth-century American city. New York's Lower East Side, where Roth grew up and where his book is set, was by far the biggest and most tumultuous of these ghettos, with more than 540,000 people (the 1910 census figure, which counted only legal immigrants) in one square mile, the world's highest urban density.⁶ Roth attended the City College of New York in the 1920's, and got a degree just before the Great Depression made college men chronically unemployed. Early in the 1930's, he joined the American Communist Party. Roth was a Communist when he wrote *Call It Sleep*, and when it came out, and for at least another twenty years.⁷ You will see why this matters later on.

The novel begins in 1907, just after Roth's birth. Roth offers us a grand, Whitmanesque panorama of New York harbor, Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, and the immense crowds of immigrants, thousands coming every day, from dozens of nations—Slovaks, Armenians, Greeks, Danes, Irish, Poles, Italians, Jews—and each people, Roth says, has its own distinctive style of joy as they set foot in the New World and meet their loved ones. But the hero, David Schearl ("Little David") and his mother Genya are cut off from this public happiness, and thrown into a nightmare of private dread. Albert, his father, greets them with scorn and violent rage: "What do you do? You refuse to recognize me. You don't know me. That's all the greeting I get." David and his mother were detained and re-examined at Ellis Island; the father translates this as "You . . . made a laughingstock of me!" He focuses on David's straw hat, a gift from an old nurse:

" . . . You don't think it's pretty?"

"Pretty? Do you still ask?" His lean jaws hardly moved as he spoke. "Can't you see those idiots lying back there [on the ferry] are watching us already?"

They're mocking us! What will the others do on the train? He looks like a clown in it. He's the cause of all this trouble anyway!"

The harsh voice, the wrathful glare, the hand flung out toward the child frightened him. Without knowing the cause he knew the stranger's anger was directed toward himself. He burst into tears and pressed closer to his mother.

"Quiet!" the voice above him snapped.

Cowering, the child wept all the louder.

"Hush, darling!" His mother's protecting hands settled on his shoulders.

"Just when we're about to land! . . . he begins this! This howling! And now we'll have it all the way home, I suppose. Quiet! You hear?"

"It's you who are frightening him, Albert!"

"Am I? Well, let him be quiet. And take that straw gear off his head."

. . . A snarl choked whatever else he would have uttered. While his wife looked on aghast, his long fingers scooped the hat from the child's head. The next instant it was sailing over the ship's side to the green waters below. The overalled men in the stern grinned at each other. The old orange-peddler shook her head and chuckled.

"Albert!" his wife caught her breath. "How could you?"

"I could!" he rapped out. "You should have left it behind."

His teeth clicked, and he glared about the deck. She lifted the sobbing child to her breast, pressed him against her. (13-15)⁸

This short scene contains most of the novel's main themes. David's father, a lineal descendant of Strindberg's *The Father*, is one of the most terrifying characters in modern literature. He is gripped by violent impulses that don't get repressed but erupt in public. His rage at his wife and son is crudely paranoid: they got themselves examined and detained at Ellis Island to spite *him*; his two-year-old son is crying to insult *him*; this boy just off the boat is dressed like a boy just off the boat so that strangers on the train will mock *him*. (In the 1990's, after twenty years of public discussion of domestic violence, David's father's problems have a far clearer context than they did in the 1960's, when I first read *Call It Sleep*, or in the 1930's, when the book first appeared.) He is a skilled worker, but his great rage drives him from job after job; eventually he will find stability as a milkman, where, he says, he doesn't have to be with other people. David's mother loves her son in a way that is protective—and he needs protection—but also sexual and hot. David, a smart and sweet but weirdly introspective kid, is terrified by his father, but also, in a strange way, thrilled by him: here, and later, he seems to aestheticize that harsh voice, that wrathful glare, that snarl, that proud outstretched hand, so that even as his father looks monstrous he feels sublime.

David's story begins with a grand panorama of New York, and of America; by the first chapter's end, his horizon shrinks into a claustropho-

bic tenement cell that could be marked NO EXIT, where his parents will torture and destroy each other for six years and four hundred pages, while he struggles desperately to breathe and grow. But his tenement life is not all bleak. Its beauty, Roth shows us, flows from Genya's overpowering sexuality, and from the sexual chemistry that flows between mother and son. *Call It Sleep* is an intensely beautiful representation of the Oedipal romance, suggestive of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (whose influence Roth acknowledged), and just as powerful. It is especially striking in its poetic language, which creates an aura around the mother and around the mother and son.

After its start at the Harbor, Roth's story resumes four years later, now from inside David's head. "Standing in the doorway, she looked as tall as a tower." David and his mother are home alone together on a hot summer day. They are sort of flirting, in a way that parents and children flirt. He asks for a drink, and she gives him a glass of water from the tap. His question takes up our central theme of Israel's size. In Roth's family romance the issue carries special urgency, because this boy's father takes advantage of his size to beat and threaten people.

"When am I going to be big enough?" he asked, resentfully.

"There will come a time," she answered, smiling. "Have little fear."

Genya speaks in an idiosyncratic but luminous voice that Roth creates for her. (It is likely that he wants us to imagine her speaking a "pure" Yiddish, as distinct from the supposedly "corrupt" English and "Yinglish" that most other people speak.) She tells her son to go play in the street so she can clean the house, but she really doesn't want him to leave, and he says he's leaving but he doesn't really want to go. As he is set to go, she asks him,

"Whom will you refresh with the icy lips the water lent you?"

"Oh!" he lifted his smiling face.

"You remember nothing," she reproached him, and with a throaty chuckle lifted him in her arms.

"There!" she laughed, nuzzling his cheek, "but you've waited too long; the sweet chill has dulled. Lips for me", she reminded him, "must always be cool as the water that wet them." She put him down. (17-20)

They flirt some more. David wants to see his birthday on the calendar, and to know when he is going to grow. But instead he notices the days in red, Sunday, the one day his father will be home. Downcast by this fact of life, he finally leaves his mother's kitchen for the street.

As David grows, he becomes sexually aware, but in twisted ways. First, he is invited by Annie, a crippled girl in his building, to "play bad" (51-5), and their encounter gives him garbled ideas: that sex is something that people do "down there", in the lower parts of their bodies, and in the dark

cellars of tenements; that it is a process initiated by women; that it makes them crippled (like Annie), but also makes children; that it gives him a tremendous physical force that makes him ("Who puts id in is de poppa. . . . Yaw de poppa"), potentially at least, like his father.⁹ It takes David another couple of years before he can imagine sex between his parents (296-9): he can't accept that this radiant being who loves him so much can also do that unspeakable thing with that dreadful man. Meanwhile, however, he comes to see that his mother's sexuality does not exist for him alone. Luter, the family boarder, his father's coworker, and a sleazy, hateful man, comes alive in Genya's presence. He picks up this signal (as his father does not), but misreads its meaning: not only have they "played bad" together, he thinks, but his mother has initiated and invited it (89). She is degraded, guilty of some sort of sexual pollution, but he shares her guilt by knowing all. Angry and distraught, he flees from her, from the house, the block, the neighborhood. He promptly gets lost. Ironically, given his sense of guilt, he is picked up by the police. They locate his mother and summon her: she, too, has never been so far from home. As they head home together, threading their way through strange streets, mother and son feel a sense of adventure and comradeship. They have become close in a whole new way. The father, of course, is angry at them both: "How did you ever let him get so far?" (114). David is getting things all wrong (he thinks of his mother and himself as partners in crime, when there has been no crime), yet his family romance has an inner dynamism of its own that is helping him grow up.

David's first misreading of his mother sets him up for a far more serious misreading of himself. He overhears her confess to her sister Bertha a disastrous love affair, back in Europe, with a *goy* (195-207). She has been treated horribly by her lover, the organist in their village church, and by her parents; she is lucky to be alive. In her heartrending tale of love and betrayal, we pick up echoes of the "Chava" story in the *Tevye* cycle and of the Gretchen Tragedy in Goethe's *Faust* (and of hundreds of tragic folk tales from Eastern Europe and all over the world). But David, who understands only fragments of the story, since the sisters are talking in Polish, picks up something that isn't there: he feels instinctively that he must be the love-child of this affair, and the son of this *goy*. It is like a revelation, and suddenly his life seems to make sense to him. Now, he thinks, he understands why he feels so alienated from the life around him, and why his father seems to hate him so much: he is truly an "other," a Polish bastard, and not a Jew at all.

From this point on, David's inner life splits in two; it is only at the book's dramatic climax that these contradictory tracks comes together. On one track, his father creates a deeper bond with him through Judaism: he asks

his wife to put David in a *cheder*, so he can get a basic Jewish education, learn something of the Hebrew language and the Bible, have a *bar mitzvah* at age thirteen, and say *kaddish* (blessing) for his father when he is dead. Here David's father briefly stops being the raving *meshugginer* we know so well, and acts as millions of normal Jewish fathers have acted through the ages. David is instantly comfortable in *cheder*, he learns Hebrew fluently, and he has a gift of empathy that enables him to project himself into the biblical world: here, at last, he feels he "fits." But, ironically, his perfect fit propels him into a situation where he appears radically unfit. His favorite text is Isaiah 6, a vision of God in the Temple, surrounded by his angels, exploding with his light and power. David feels he has seen the light, the luminous explosion, over by the electric trolley on Avenue D. (We can recognize the explosion of light as an electrical breakdown, a short circuit, but David can't.) Isaiah is terrified, he is too impure to bear what he has seen. But an angel touches his mouth with a burning coal: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven" (6:6). Now he can speak to Israel, and he says it will be utterly wasted before it can be saved. David identifies himself totally with this prophetic vision, and dreads his own impurity. His spiritual anguish leads him to tell his *rebbe* his mother's confession. The *rebbe* is stunned: can it be that his once-in-a-generation star pupil, "a true Yiddish child" (365), "a seraph among Esau's goyim" (387), is not a Jew at all?¹⁰

Meanwhile, David presses toward transgression and betrayal on another front. As he grows and feels more confident, he dares to go up on the roof, where he can see the harbor and the whole city, and feel free. There he meets Leo, a Catholic boy who flies kites, skates through the streets, gets into fights, and lives a loose and unsupervised life ("no parents to interfere, no orders to obey—nothing" [319]). Leo is not only a Catholic, but a Catholic from Poland, his parents' Old Country, hence magically connected to the *goy* whom David dreams is his real father. Leo explains Catholic theology, and claims he is free to do anything because he is protected by the Holy Family; he gives David a set of his magical rosary beads. David is in awe and utterly abject before Leo, and offers him anything he wants. What he wants, it turns out, is to be a sexual predator, and he wants David to smuggle him into David's aunt's candy store and into her house, to give him a crack at her two preadolescent girls. Leo's caper falls flat, but meanwhile it leads David to humiliate both his family and, everybody feels, the Jewish people. "And exactly the same way—a goy!" David's uncle screams at his wife, "It's a family trait by now!" (382). David's family romance has driven him to reenact his mother's primal crime. He tried to overcome ethnic prejudices, but in a way that seemed designed to prove these prejudices are right. He reached out, but in a poisoned embrace.

Roth constructs an unbearably intense, Dostoevskian "scandal scene," where the *rebbe* and David's aunt and uncle simultaneously arrive at David's tenement, and their two stories together break over his head (384–403). David's father explodes in a series of paranoid diatribes, increasingly hysterical and unbalanced. He springs on the company a confession that he murdered his father back in Poland; though it is likely, from the way he tells the story, that what he was really guilty of was Ivan Karamazov's crime, *desire* to murder his father.¹¹ But his sense of guilt includes no contrition; it only magnifies his self-righteous fury in assigning guilt to others.

"Hear me!" He was slavered at the mouth. . . . "All these years my blood told me! Whispered at me whenever I looked at him, nudged me and told me he wasn't mine! From the very moment I saw him in your arms, out of the ship, I guessed, I guessed! . . . It's been in my way, tangled me. . . . Haven't you ever seen it? That weeks and weeks go by and I'm no man at all? No man as other men are? You know of what I speak, having known others!" (391–3, 401–02)

By paranoid logic, Albert's own sexual difficulties become proof of his wife's and child's conspiracy against him.

At the end of his last tirade (401), Albert announces that he is going to kill his son. The rest of the family seems numb, in a state of shock. Maybe they are so inured to his emotional violence, they don't recognize (as Roth's readers do) that this time he is over the edge. David, whimpering, in shock along with everyone else, drenched in guilt, offers his father a broken horsewhip (a fine Dostoevskian black-comic detail), one of Albert's own discards, to beat him with. He commences, slowly, with a sadistic glee. And now, in a stunning climax, as Albert hits David and he falls, Leo's rosary beads fall out of his coat. Albert lets loose a final barrage:

"God's own hand! A sign! A witness!" his father was raving, whirling the whip in his flying arms. "A proof of my word! The truth! Another's! A goy's! A cross! A sign of filth! Let me strangle him! Let me rid the world of a sin!" (402)

The rosary, sensational detail, jars the family out of their trance and mobilizes them to resist the child sacrifice that is about to happen. Albert lunges forward for the kill. But David's aunt Bertha is "hanging like a dead weight from his father's whip-hand. 'He'll slay him,' she shrieked, 'He'll trample on him as he let his father be trampled on. Hurry, Genya!'" At the last minute, Genya flings herself against the door, and pushes David out of the house and down the stairs to the street.

David escapes a sacrifice, yet now he seems ready to sacrifice himself. He runs for the trolley tracks: he will touch the third rail, set off a luminous explosion, and give himself a massive electric shock. He seems to know

that he can get himself killed by doing this. Why is he doing it? As David runs for the tracks, he is hysterical, but purposeful; but it is hard for us to grasp just what his purpose is. In a world where Israel is chronically small, he is working in a great prophetic Jewish tradition by trying to think big. But what is he thinking of? First, he wants to create a dialogue with God: he wants to evoke God's presence and power; he wants God to forgive his real and imagined sins, and to take away his guilt, just as God did for the prophet Isaiah (6:7). A little while ago he was taken in by a *goy*, not only by Leo's sleazy *macho*, but by his magic and fetishism. Now he doesn't need Leo—or his mythical father the organist—any more: he is making an existential leap on his own. He is confronting God directly in a Jewish idiom, affirming his Jewishness, even flaunting it before the world.

In addition, David feels he is showing his good faith and ultimate seriousness by putting his life on the line. In fact, this particular act of faith has been central to the mass politics of the past two hundred years. It was only in the Age of Revolution, when the *proste menshen* of the modern world, the common people, were ready to stake their lives, that they won respect and power and made human rights real.¹² David has been cut off from collective politics both by his size and age and by his family's isolation. But he makes a revolution of his own in a subjective and existential way.

After he risks and nearly destroys himself, David at last wins recognition from his angry God. It happens indirectly—maybe only Shakespeare or Dostoevsky could have written a scene where these two look into each other's eyes—but it is for real. David nearly electrocutes himself, but he is saved, and carried home under the protection of a crowd, a doctor, and a cop. A neighbor, "a fattish, bare-armed woman" who lives on the same floor as the Schearls, but whose name we never learn, tells the policeman what transpired after David ran away. She narrates in excruciatingly broken English, which even suggests a vaudeville parody of "Yinglish."

En dey vas fightingk, Oy-yoy-yoy! Vid scrimms! . . . En vee vus listeningk, en' dis man vos crying. *Ab'm kbrezzy! I dun know vod I do! I dun' know vod I said. . . . Yes, Yes, be was saying, My sawn, Mine, Yes.* (436-7, italics mine)

Albert finally says the magic words that he has resisted, and then actively denied: *My son*. And he finally accepts Genya's story of David's birth: "Awld eight. Eight en'—en vun mawnt'. He vas bawn in—". The cop cuts Albert off impatiently, because David's age (eight years, one month) and date of birth mean nothing to him. But they mean everything to David, and to Genya, and to us. After abusing his wife and nearly destroying his child, Strindberg style, Albert has turned and repented. He has come to trust Genya and accept her calendar, in which David's father is nobody but himself.

Just before David falls asleep, "His father stood in the doorway dissolved in the dark. Only the glitter in his eyes was sharply visible on the puffy grey ankle." The doctor has written a prescription uncharacteristically volunteers to go get it, then quotes the doctor: "David should be better in a day or two. Then there is a long silence as they converse (in articulate Yiddish instead of broken English):

"It—it's my fault, isn't it?"

She shook her head wearily. "What use is there to talk about fault? None foresaw this. No one alone brought it on. And if it's faults we're talking about it's mine as well. I never told you. I let him listen to me ten months ago. I even drove him downstairs to—to—"

"To protect him—from me?"

"Yes."

"I'll go get it." He turned heavily out of the doorway. (440)

Albert accepts a reality that has been visible to everyone but him now: he was an overwhelming menace from whom his son needed protection. Now that he has affirmed himself as a father, he is implicitly obliged to provide his son with protection from now on. And now that Genya does not have to act as a single parent anymore, she can afford to surrender at least some of her saintliness. And now that David had been out of the thick edge, and come through the valley of the shadow of death, he can relax and let himself be taken care of. Because he has risked everything and won recognition, he can even afford magnanimity: as he hears David's steps out the door, "A vague, remote pity stirred within his breast, and he can embrace all the realities that have assaulted him, and that he has confronted, "and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strength and triumph, strangest acquiescence. One might as well call it sleep. His eyes" (440-1).

David's family romance drove him to grow up fast, too fast; but through Roth's dialectical imagination, his growth transforms his real family. It is at last he who can take care of him. David is a modern Jacob, and he is underweight, who still has the courage to wrestle with his angel, and he is finally blessed and becomes Israel. Israel's reward for growing up is to be reborn into a new life where he can live like a child. He can regress and rest.

Where does the Schearl family romance fit in the long waves of Jewish history? Readers of the Bible will surely notice that Roth's portrait of a father, seen through his child's eyes, sounds a lot like a portrait of a father in his cruelest, most murderous incarnations.

"Answer me."

Answer me, his words rang out. Answer me, but they meant Despair. Who could answer his father? In that dread summons the judgment was already sealed.

...

"Your only son!" she wailed, pressing David convulsively to her. "Your only son!"

"Don't tell me that! He's no son of mine! Would that he were dead at my feet!" (83, 84)

And his child's vision of his mother recalls some of the Canaanite goddesses in whose being sexuality, nurturance, and fertility converged. At some points in the Bible, Yahweh appears as a kind of sexual terrorist who is consumed by jealousy and determined to destroy utterly the mother goddesses and all the guilty pleasures they embody. The opposition between the male and female gods appears total, Yahweh would rather see Israel dead than shared—"Not pitied", he tells Hosea, "Not my people" (1:6-8)—and Israel seems like a child in a custody struggle, in the process of being ripped to pieces. But our Bible offers green oases. Our prophets imagined a God who has the power to evolve, to develop and grow. Up to now, they said, not just Israel but even God has lived in the dark. We have transgressed, we have sinned, they say, but there are also vital things that God has missed; but through dialogue and struggle, our God can learn even as we learn ourselves. Then God and Israel can come together in a *new covenant* (Hosea 2:18-20; Jeremiah 31:31). Yahweh's sexual jealousy and uncontrolled rage have become a mortal danger to his child Israel. The prophets imagine a God who can overcome, who can recognize, who can accept and include, who can incorporate male and female and bring them together in peace.

Every new generation of Jews has to wrestle with the problems of Jewish identity on its own. In modern times, when, as Hegel says, "The principle of the modern world is freedom of subjectivity," identity questions force themselves on every single subject. Thus every Jew is both forced and free to work out what kind of Jew he or she is going to be. And it is a question of sexuality as well as a question of observance and belief. It is nice that both the Bible and modern Jewish literature offer us visions in which, like Albert and Genya on Roth's last page, male and female forces, father and mother, can recognize each other and unite, and children can be reborn in peace.¹³

I have been arguing that the Jews, forced by nature and history to live small, have survived and thrived by learning to think big. This argument is rooted in Nietzsche, and I don't want to quit without giving him due credit. Take, for instance, this fabulous passage from *The Genealogy of Morals*:

Whatever else has been done to damage the powerful and great of the earth seems trivial compared with what the Jews have done, that priestly people who avenged themselves on their enemies and oppressors by radically inverting their values, that is, by an act of the most spiritual vengeance.

For two thousand years and more, Jewish life has been animated by "the furious hatred of the underprivileged and impotent." Driven by this hatred, by "rancor turning creative," we

dared to invert the aristocratic value equations—good/noble/powerful/beautiful/happy/favored by the gods—and to maintain that only the poor, the powerless, are good; only the suffering, the sick, are truly blessed. But you, noble and mighty ones of the earth, will be, to all eternity . . . the godless, the cursed, and the damned!¹⁴

Surely Nietzsche was right to say that visions and ideals are rooted in a will to power. And he was right to think that Jewish expressions of the will to power have been radically innovative. But then what's his complaint? Why shouldn't we fight for our lives in any way we can? Nietzsche is always saying the will to power makes the world go round; fine, so why shouldn't it drive and inspire the small and weak as well as the big and strong? What Jews did to the will to power long ago, and are still doing to it today, has been to sublimate it, to create structures where people could struggle without anybody getting killed. We should be able to enjoy some post-Nietzschean *nachis* for that.

The Crowd in the Family Romance

I have presented the family romance in *Call It Sleep* as an essentially subjective phenomenon, typical of modernity, located within an individual and within his family, disconnected from any collective life. But in fact collective life plays a crucial role in the story:

Humanity. On feet, on crutches, in carts and cars . . . Human voices, motion, seething, throbbing, bawling, honking horns, and whistling. Troubling the far clusters of street lamps, setting lights guttering with their passing bodies like a wind. (407)

In a remarkable stretch of bravura writing (403-31), Roth makes the whole neighborhood pass through David's head—warehousemen, pushcart peddlers, working girls, gamblers by the river, customers in a saloon, sailors on a ship, a revolutionary orator and his (mostly skeptical) crowd—as he passes them by. These people are living lives that sound insular and hermetically sealed, with no apparent relationship to each other. Their fragments of conversation are surprisingly personal. It is as if

David becomes magically gifted, so that he not merely overhears people's voices, but actually, in a second or two, penetrates into their whole lives.¹⁵ This power to enter into people's lives may be Roth's idea of the closest thing to prophetic power in modern times, the age of free subjectivity. It is the power of the novelist.

David touches the third rail. He gets a tremendous electric shock, which nearly kills him. For an instant he feels in touch with overwhelming primal force. Then he blacks out, and blows out all the power in the neighborhood. Suddenly, all the different worlds of the Lower East Side come to a stop. They stop short in a dozen different languages and dialects:

"W'at?"

"W'ut?"

"Va-at?"

"Gaw blimey!"

"W'atsa da ma?"

Jesus!"

"Give a look! Id's rain—

"Shawt soicit, Mack—"

"Mary, w'at's goin—"

"Schloimee, a blitz like!"

"Hey mate!"

On Avenue D, a long burst of flame spurted from underground, growled as if the veil of earth were splitting. . . . On Avenue C, the lights of the trolley-car waned and wavered. The motorman cursed, feeling the power drain. In the Royal Warehouse, the blinking watchman tugged at the jammed and stubborn window. The shriveled coal-heaver leaned unsteadily. . . .

The street was filled with running men, faces carved and ghostly in the fierce light. . . .

"Christ, it's a kid!"

"Oy! Oy vai! Oy vai! Oy vai!"

"Git a cop!"

"Don't touch 'im!"

"Bambino! Madre mia!"

"Mary. It's jus' a kid!"

"Helftz! Helftz! Helftz Yeedin! Rotivit!" (419-21)

Up to now, the people of the Lower East Side have lived in contiguous but segregated worlds, hermetically sealed by barriers of language, ethnicity, class, sex, barely aware of each other's existence, or else aware of each other as taboo. What little David achieves—perhaps inadvertently, but authentically—is to get these strangers to recognize each other and work together for the first time in their lives.

Although the people in this crowd can barely communicate (in the everyday street, they probably could not communicate), the state of emergency of a child in lethal danger inspires them to overleap ethnic and cultural barriers and focus on what matters most. Thus they pull David off the third rail and perform some rough sort of artificial respiration that brings him back to life; although their relations with officials appear to be at best shaky, they manage to summon an Irish cop who certifies that the boy has broken the law and a WASP doctor who certifies that he will live. They then bear David home in a triumphal procession; they congratulate him for surviving, but also congratulate each other for helping him survive. In these anonymous people, Henry Roth has created what may be American literature's first multicultural crowd. They are a modern, and American, incarnation of the multicultural world where Isaiah imagined a little Israel could belong almost three thousand years ago: the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the lion will eat straw like the ox, and a little child, the one with the vision, will lead them.

This vision of a multicultural crowd, talking different languages yet able to understand each other and work together in an emergency, is important not only in the history of Judaism, but also in the history of Communism. I mentioned before that Roth was a Communist when he wrote *Call It Sleep* and for many years after. His book got a frigid response from the Party journal *New Masses*, which said, "It is a pity that so many young writers drawn from the proletariat can make no better use of their experience than as material for introspective and febrile novels." Roth was understandably upset by this: as he told Leonard Michaels in the 1980's, "I thought I was writing a proletarian novel."¹⁶ The Party's stupidity and rigidity, which help define the word "Stalinism," do not define all periods of Party history. *Call It Sleep* was a victim of the very end of the Comintern's "Third Period," from 1928 to 1935. In those disastrous years, the Party, through its utter refusal to share space and make alliances with any other leftists or liberals, helped Hitler come to power. After 1933, the Party saw what it had done, and recoiled in horror. But the recoil mechanism, made in Moscow, took some time to work. Finally, in the summer of 1935, the Comintern proclaimed a new strategy, which it called the "Popular Front," a "union of all democratic forces against fascism."¹⁷ Now Communists could work, politically and culturally, with all sorts of people who weren't communistic or revolutionary at all. The Popular Front, roughly from 1935 to 1946 (minus the two years of the Hitler-Stalin pact), is the one really creative period of American Communism. Their greatest achievement was to organize the major American industries under the banner of the C.I.O. The culture of the Front included (and this is only a little) the Works Progress Administration Guides, the great folklore collections, James Agee and

Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, John Steinbeck's and John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*, Martha Graham and Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring," Robert Rossen-Abraham Polonsky-John Garfield's *Body and Soul* and *Force of Evil*, and a series of giant murals that framed public buildings and public spaces all over 1930's America. (Many have been bricked or painted over, or disintegrated beyond repair, but a surprising number can still be recognized and admired.) The main theme of these murals, and of Popular Front culture in general, is that America is so great because it is "trans-national," so open to so many different kinds of people.¹⁸

Roth's vision of a multicultural crowd places him in the vanguard of creators of the Popular Front, the high point of Communism in the U.S.A. But even now, fifty years later, after the eclipse of Communism, his portrait of the urban crowd still has visionary power, whenever we try to dream of what we want America to be.

David in Israel

At the very end of 1994, a reading of King David's story almost brought Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's government down. The trouble started when Shimon Peres, Rabin's Foreign Minister, addressing the Knesset (the parliament), said that his idea of Judaism did not include "occupation and ruling over other people."¹⁹ A member of one of the far-right parties shouted that King David had done plenty of both. Peres replied: "Not everything King David did is acceptable to a Jew, on the ground [or] on the roofs." Those roofs clearly allude to David's desire for Bathsheba (discussed earlier in this essay), which not only leads him to homicide, but also ensures an age of permanent warfare. Peres's characterization of King David set off a riot among the Orthodox and right-wingers, who ran through the streets screaming and vilified Peres (and Rabin) for heresy. They cited Talmudic authority to show that no man has the right to say King David sinned.²⁰ They stirred up a vote of No Confidence, and although the vote failed (as expected), the political atmosphere grew even more hysterical than usual. It took some weeks before the hermeneutic wars abated and the Knesset focused on the present again.

It is fascinating to see the vitality of the Bible in Israel's political culture, and the way ancient Scripture is assimilated by modern and secular politicians like Peres and Rabin, Begin and Shamir. In the twentieth century, as Israel has become a state again, the Bible has emerged as one of the primary sources of legitimacy for all the state's contending forces. It has become the basis of cultural traditions that are vivid and desperately relevant, but that have radically opposite and contradictory meanings. The Israeli Right acted as if they were using the Bible simply, naively, as a source of role models: David had taken what he wanted, and so would they; as David's

acquisitiveness was blessed by God, so was their own; as David had grabbed land and people, so Israel should do today; as God blessed it then—by success—so he would bless it now. Peres, a longtime supporter of peace (and sharer of the Nobel Peace Prize with Rabin and Yasir Arafat), was suggesting that Israel's past and present wars and militarism "on the ground" were poisoned by the same greed and overreaching that had turned King David's lustfulness into murderousness "on the roof." For Peres, the Biblical story's point is not only that power corrupts, but also that Israel's ancient and modern abuses of power have endangered its own survival. Peres and Rabin were making the same claim I have been making here: that for the Jews, survival means recognizing our limits, and thinking big means understanding how to live small. The argument between them and those Jews who recognize no limits on Israel at all will probably never end. It is likely to reappear in an endless variety of forms so long as the Jews remain alive on earth.

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14. "A Little Child"

1. In the Book of Hosea, one of
the earliest prophetic books, the
image of sacred marriage becomes
the primary symbol of the bond
between God and Israel. In the ear-
lier parts of the book, this image is
introduced as an attribute of
Canaanite religion, and blended
with an image of sacred prostitution,
supposedly connected to local
fertility cults and rites. Hosea's life,
as he describes it, is a textbook case
of "The personal is political." He
marries a woman who betrays him,
taking many lovers and also wor-
shipping many gods. He denounces
her infidelity, but also proclaims his
steadfast love (*chesed*), and lyrically
implores her to return. Hosea
grows hysterical in denouncing the
Canaanites' sacred orgies (whose
existence scholars now doubt). One
especially intriguing aspect of
Hosea is a subtext of divine self-crit-
icism. Why, the prophet asks, did
this beautiful marriage (Hosea/
Gomer, Yahweh/Israel) fail? The
prophet, who personifies God, recog-
nizes that he was carried away by
his own desires and fantasies, and
inadequately sensitive to his wife's
real needs. He hopes to renegotiate
their marriage on a new and more
authentically mutual basis, some-
thing like the "new covenant"
promised in Jeremiah 31:31. Hosea
is at once a tragedy of adultery and
a comedy of remarriage, *Anna
Karenina* merged with *Adam's Rib*.

2. Cited in Arthur Hertzberg, *The
French Enlightenment and the Jews: The
Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism*. New
York: Schocken, 1970, p. 360. See
also Werner Keller, *Diaspora: The
Post-Biblical History of the Jews*, trans.

Richard and Clara Winston. New
York: Harcourt, Brace & World,
1969, "The Beacon of the French
Revolution," pp. 376-9.

3. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*.
Addition to Paragraph 273, ed. and
trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford
University Press, 1945, p. 286.
Italics mine.

4. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*,
1910-23, trans. Joseph Kresh, Martin
Greenberg, and Hannah Arendt.
Harmondsworth, Middlesex:
Penguin, 1964.

5. Freud, "Family Romances"
(1909), reprinted in *Collected Papers*,
trans. and ed. James Strachey. Basic
Books, 1959, vol. V, pp. 74-8.
Freud's essay originally appeared as
a chapter in Otto Rank's 1909 book,
The Myth of the Birth of the Hero.
Freud's original title was "The
Family Romances of Neurotics,"
but in fact he saw family romance as
part of a process of normal growth
and development.

6. The best overall account of this
migration, and of the culture that
grew from it, is Irving Howe, assist-
ed by Kenneth Libo, *World of Our
Fathers*. New York: Harcourt Brace
Jovanovich, 1976.

7. Roth has given many different
accounts of his past politics. I inter-
viewed him in Albuquerque, New
Mexico, Summer, 1980. At that
time, he placed his rupture with
Communism in 1956 (the year of
Khrushchev's revelations about
Stalinism, followed by a revolution
in Hungary, and its suppression by
the U.S.S.R.) and, an hour later, in
1967 (Israel's victory in the Six-Day
War, followed by waves of official
anti-Semitism in all Communist
countries). In the later 1980's, how-
ever, he began to tell interviewers
that he was never a Communist at
all, but only a victim of Communist
bullying and intimidation. My rea-
sons for doubting this will become
clear.

8. Page numbers cited are from the
beloved (and endlessly reprinted)
1964 Avon paperback edition. That
edition features a critical afterword
by the British critic Walter Allen,
and a beautiful tenement photo-
graph on the cover by Jay Maisel.
The photo is evocative of Jacob
Riis and Lewis Hine, but contains
many emphases that are especially
appropriate to Roth's book: in the
foreground, clotheslines display

men's and women's underwear, and
fire escapes lead up to roofs; in the
background, visible only in faint
shadows, there is a panorama of
New York City skyscrapers. The
Avon edition went out of print in
the late 1980's, and there is now a
new edition on the market, pub-
lished in 1990 by Noonday/Farrar,
Straus & Giroux. It is sewn-bound,
as if built to last (let us hope so),
and it has a fine introduction by
Alfred Kazin, and an Afterword by
Hana Wirth Neshet, "Between
Mother Tongue and Native
Language in *Call It Sleep*." Page
numbers in the body of the novel
are identical in the Noonday edi-
tion, making life easier for critics
and their readers, and helping the
Jewish culture of narration live on.

9. In a novel by a writer who lived
in Greenwich Village in the 1930's,
"id" has to be a crude psychoan-
alytic allusion.

10. David's Jewishness cannot be
problematic according to rabbinic
law, where descent comes through
the mother, regardless of the
father's identity. After the rabbis
have heard David's story of his
mother's story, they began to
worry about whether David was
circumcised: "Let us hope they saw
to it he was made a Jew" (375). But
even if "they" hadn't seen to it, cir-
cumcision can legitimately take
place anytime in a man's life. We
need to understand that David
fears an excommunication, an exist-
ential otherness, far deeper and
more total than anything that
would be possible in normal
Jewish life.

11. "Why, is there anyone here
who doesn't wish his father's death?
... They all long for their father's
death, because one beast devours
another!" *The Brothers Karamazov*,
Book XII, Ch. 4, trans. Andrew
MacAndrew. New York: Bantam,
1970, p. 825. This is a basic element
of Freud's Oedipus Complex, and a
central theme in his *Interpretation of
Dreams* (1900): that we are all guilty
of this and other evil desires.

12. In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*
(1807), Hegel argued very forceful-
ly that the enslaved masses had to
risk their lives before they could
become free. See Herbert Marcuse,
*Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the
Rise of Social Theory*. Boston:
Beacon, 1960, for an incisive dis-

ussion of this theme, including its
influence on the young Marx.

In Jewish mass politics of the
1900's, both in the Russian Empire
and on the Lower East Side of New
York, thousands of Jews staked
their lives, and many were killed, in
differently configured but equally
urgent fights for collective free-
dom. On Eastern Europe, see esp.
Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and
Politics: Socialism, Nationalism and the
Russian Jews, 1862-1917*. Cambridge,
1981; on the sweatshops of New
York, see Howe, *World of Our
Fathers*, esp. Chs. 9-10.

13. These readings and formula-
tions owe something to David
Biale's fascinating book, *Eros and the
Jews*. Basic Books, 1992, though I
have no idea whether Biale would
be comfortable with them.

14. Nietzsche, *The Birth of
Tragedy/The Genealogy of Morals*,
trans. Francis Golffing. Anchor,
1956, pp. 167-8.

15. Montage was one of the most
important innovations of mod-
ernism. It became a force in all
arts—painting, music, photogra-
phy, drama, cinema. The most bril-
liant creators of montage in
modernist fiction were James Joyce,
especially in *Ulysses* (1922), and
William Faulkner. It is easy to see
their influence here, but Roth is dis-
tinctive in the intimately personal
character of his montages: this is
David's way of breaking up the
world, shaped by what he needs and
what he knows; the street would
sound a lot different through the
prism of his mother's or father's or
rebbe's mind.

16. Leonard Michaels, "Life and
Art in Henry Roth," *New York Times
Book Review*, August 15, 1993,
reprinted as the Introduction to the
paperback edition of *Shifting
Landscape*, Roth's collection of
short pieces, letters, and interviews,
ed. Mario Materassi. New York: St.
Martin's, 1994.

17. Robert Daniels, *A Documentary
History of Communism*, 2 vols. New
York: Vintage, 1962, vol. 2, pp.
107-17, reprints basic Third Period
and Popular Front manifestos.
Coser and Howe, in their history of
the CPUSA, and Daniel Aaron, in
Writers on the Left (New York: Avon,
1962), say some interesting things
about the Popular Front, but the
great work on the worldwide cul-

ture of the Popular Front remains
to be written.

18. This concept was coined in a
brilliant 1916 essay by Randolph
Bourne, "Trans-National Amer-
ica," in *War and the Intellectuals:
Collected Essays, 1915-1919*, ed. Carl
Resek. New York: Harper, 1964, pp.
107-23; note also "The Jew and
Trans-National America," pp.
124-33. Bourne is one of the
heroes of Christopher Lasch's *The
New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963:
The Intellectual as a Social Type*. New
York: Vintage, 1967. See also, on
the pre-1960's, John Higham,
"Ethnic Pluralism in Modern
American Thought," in *Send These
To Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in
Urban America*. New York:
Atheneum, 1975, pp. 196-230.

Ironically, although Bourne was
a notorious opponent of the First
World War, his "trans-national"
idea was eagerly appropriated by
the war propaganda machine,
which claimed that our trans-
national character made us better
than the old, homogenous nations
of Europe, and that this was why it
was urgent for us to win. The idea
was appropriated again in the
Second World War, and incarnated
in dozens of Hollywood movies
(e.g., Frank Sinatra/Albert Maltz's
stirring short film *The House I Live
In*), but this time the Communists
of the Popular Front, who were
often writing and directing those
movies, didn't mind.

19. *New York Times*, stories by Clyde
Haberman, December 16 and 26,
1994, and anti-Rabin letter from
Richard Horowitz, dated December
26, published January 2, 1995. My
citation from Peres preserves his
words but changes their order.

20. The *New York Times* story of
December 16, 1994, which first
reported this controversy, conclud-
ed with a rare exegetical interven-
tion. After citing Orthodox in-
sistence that King David could
not have sinned, Clyde Haberman
ended with the (accurate) observa-
tion that "The final verse of [2
Samuel] Chapter 11 states unequiv-
ocally, 'The thing that David had
done displeased the Lord.'"

15. Parvenu or Palimpsest

1. From an immense range of
materials, see Edward Said,