

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT!

JEWISH LITERATURE

Identity and Imagination

A MIND OF HER OWN

Fathers and Daughters in a Changing World

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Fathers and Daughters in a Changing World

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According to Genesis, Adam didn't have any daughters, but later rabbinic scholars, aware of the logistical difficulties that would ensue were this indeed the case, made sure to fill in the blanks. Nevertheless, the precedent of highlighting sons at the expense of daughters was established, and continued into the modern age. This isn't to suggest that daughters are entirely absent from the Bible, only that the way in which they are presented speaks volumes even when the daughters themselves do not. There's Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, who seems little more than a symbol of victimhood, raped by a non-Jew and avenged by her brothers. Or Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel, whose stories revolve largely around their marriage to Jacob and their subsequent competition for his favors and for his children.

The domestic education of daughters—preparing them for their domestic roles as wives and mothers—is a major theme of biblical and rabbinic literature. Even the phrase “daughter of Israel,” used frequently in traditional literature, was an attempt to articulate a set of ideal traits for the Jewish woman: modest, virtuous, committed to home, hearth, and children. And the marriage structure in traditional Jewish life bore this out: Laden with dowries, treated as commodities, daughters were married off to men chosen for their family heritage or scholarly abilities. When not attached to their families, women were attached to their husbands.

Yet the realities of women's lives in traditional Jewish society were far more complex. Dowries did not last forever, but the virtue of supporting one's husband in his studies did. As a result, women often went into business during medieval and early modern times, granting them exposure to the outside world. This meant that at times daughters had training and possessed practical skills their own fathers might lack. This kind of earthly wisdom is often reflected in medieval Jewish folktales and riddles, where a wise daughter has the answers to questions that sage counselors and rabbis lack. Not surprisingly, their answers reflect common sense or practical reasoning rather than the highly prized knowledge of the sacred texts. And such tales don't necessarily upset masculine dominance: The young woman often ends up marrying and accepting a kind of domestic subordination. Fathers made certain that their sons had a classic education, which included the study of the Hebrew and Aramaic texts of the tradition. For daughters, this sort of formal education was not only unnecessary but often considered undesirable. Indeed, a controversial and much interpreted rabbinic

statement suggests that if a man teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he teaches her foolishness. The Jews may be the people of the book, but daughters were often not included in this formulation.

Which is not to say they weren't reading any books. As the printing press flourished, publishers, aware that young women were literate in Yiddish, began to produce works aimed largely at women and uneducated men. Many of these works included versions of great rabbinic stories, as well as Judaized versions of non-Jewish works of literature, like *A Thousand and One Nights* and the tales of the German comic figure Till Eulenspiegel. In 16th and 17th century Europe, it was not uncommon for wealthy daughters to learn the languages of the non-Jewish populations surrounding them, a fact reflected in the literature of the time. In the 17th century, Glückel of Hameln relates the story of a young girl who uses her knowledge of French to foil the plot of some anti-Semites who would rob her father.

By the middle of the 18th century, Jews had moved toward an uneasy encounter with modernity, emancipation, and enlightenment. It was the daughters who were, in some sense, the cutting edge of this encounter. More familiar with European languages and cultural customs than their more traditionally minded and inward-looking fathers, they often welcomed a kind of cultural equality predicated on the adoption of European norms. This gave rise to a generation of *salonnières* who dominated the Berlin social scene at the end of the 18th century. The character of the daughter in Aaron Halle-Wolfssohn's 1794 play *Silliness and Sanctimony* (a Jewish version of Molière's *Tartuffe*) is symbolic of a rapidly changing society, and the underlying attitudes behind those changes.

By crafting a plot that features a rich, traditional father pitted against his frivolous daughter, a spoiled girl with only a superficial understanding of the Enlightenment, Halle-Wolfssohn mocks antiquated ideas about Jewish life while at the same time suggesting that young women were untutored, prone to moral error, and despite their modern orientation, in need of direction by future husbands. By the 19th century, Halle-Wolfssohn's play had become the model for a series of works, both dramatic and in prose, written by young men of Enlightenment sensibilities. In these stories, the arranged marriage stands for the blindness of the older generation, just as the father's eventual blessing of a romantic match suggests the moral value of the modern point of view. Even in these works, however, women rarely emerge as powerful characters in their own right. Rather, they remain symbols of a passive generation waiting for reformers to stir them into action. Indeed, there is little difference between these works and the popular 19th-century Yiddish chapbooks written by authors such as Nachum Mayer Shaykevitch (better known as Shomer) and featuring king's daughters saved by noble princes.

The end of the 19th century brought about substantial changes in both the lives of, and literature about, women. The rapid spread of modernization, the movement out of the country and into the city, allowed for a kind of reinvention impossible in the smaller *shtetls*. New sweeping historical trends—nationalism, socialism, anarchism—affected young Jews and non-Jews alike. At the same time, Jewish writers expanded their range of writing styles. Modern Yiddish writers such as David Bergelson, steeped in the tradition of Russian literature, with its increasingly subtle portrayal of complex heroines, began to create



increasingly nuanced female characters. The culmination of these heroines, and certainly the most remarkable daughters in the literature of the time, can be found in *Tevye the Dairyman*. Sholem Aleichem's portrayal of Tevye's daughters is at once psychologically nuanced and an accurate reflection of the changing attitudes of the time.

The most powerful catalyst to the reinvention of fathers and daughters in literature, however, was the mass emigration of Russian Jews to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the New World, all of the old ways of life were up for renegotiation. Many abandoned traditional ways of life—often as much out of economic necessity as out of a desire to be Americanized; they also set aside the old relationships between parents and children. Daughters would often work alongside parents; they would take active roles in union organizing; they would study to become professionals; they were exposed to a culture whose norms of romance and courtship were far different from those of Eastern Europe; they felt that they should be able to live their own lives and determine their own destiny, not one set out by their fathers.

The New World allowed new opportunities for women to express these hopes and desires in their own voices. Some Jewish women were published in Eastern Europe during the early 20th century, but the majority of great women writers—the poets Anna Margolin and Kadya Molodowsky, the story writer Dvora Baron, the memoirist Mary Antin, and the novelist Anzia Yezierska—spent the bulk of their careers in America or Palestine (Israel). For the first time, readers encountered stories of Jewish fathers and daughters written by daughters.

Steeped in the classical allusions that were once the exclusive province of men, Baron's careful, detached stories bristle with a barely submerged sense of anger. In Yezierska's writing, on the other hand, the anger against the older generation (and fathers in particular) boils over. Margolin and Molodowsky take a more subtle, indirect approach, but the sense of freedom and passion that pervades their works is as much a response to the older generation as Yezierska's *cri de coeur*.

As the 20th century continued, conflicts between fathers and daughters swelled and ebbed; writers as various as Herman Wouk, Philip Roth, Allegra Goodman, Johanna Kaplan, and Myla Goldberg have taken their shot at the theme, reflecting changing trends in what has variously been called women's liberation, feminism of the first wave and the second wave, and post-feminism. Though the genre of memoir and autobiography had existed in Jewish literature in one form or another for centuries, its huge increase in popularity in recent years has introduced new voices. Anne Roiphe, Eva Hoffman, and Daphne Merkin write compellingly and intelligently about how family has come to shape them while demanding we cease to see them as anyone's daughters but simply and powerfully as writers.

Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman*

Has there ever been a father like Tevye the Dairyman? When, in 1894, Sholem Aleichem wrote the first story of his encounter with a woodhauler who had managed to elevate his status to that of a dairyman, Tevye's daughters are barely mentioned. As Tevye became



popular, Sholem Aleichem realized that the real story was Tevye's relationship with his daughters, who are, as Tevye boasts, "their own dowry."

In the resulting masterwork, the tales of these daughters and their struggles with their father represent nothing less than the changing nature of modern Jewish life. Take "Today's Children," for example. Written at the end of the 19th century, the story—whose title itself raises the question of time, and whose heroine, Tevye's daughter Tsaytl, has a name that means "little time"—deals with the transition in Jewish society from arranged marriage to romantic love, a pressing issue for modern Jewish writers. But if this is a story of generational conflict, between an old and new world, Tevye makes a somewhat odd symbol of the old world. A Godarguer, a grand talker, a man who likes to think, Tevye is willing to try to see the other side of the issue. And he is proud of his daughters' brains and beauty; he loves them madly and wants the best for them, even when it breaks his heart. So while Tevye is flabbergasted when Motl comes to him as his own matchmaker, he pretends to have a prophetic dream to convince his wife that Motl and Tsaytl will make a good match after all.

Similarly, we see Hodl, who marries the revolutionary Pertchik, and then follows him to Siberia when he is arrested for revolutionary activity. Writing in the period leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1905, Sholem Aleichem was aware of the political foment among the younger generation. And later we see Beilke, whose marriage to a parvenu industrialist—again resonant with contemporary changes in Jewish life—allows Tevye to discover, to his sorrow, that getting what you want may be a curse and not a blessing. And then there is Shprintze, whose dark end resembles that of jilted lovers in books popular at the time, but manages to transcend simple melodrama.

But most of all there is Chava, whom Tevye loves most and who shakes his faith in her and his own world view: She marries a non-Jew and leaves Tevye and his community, seemingly forever. Even here, though, Tevye, tormented both by previous arguments with Chava and by his own thoughts, begins to wonder why it was that God created Jews and non-Jews differently. Nevertheless, Sholem Aleichem has Chava return and admit she was wrong, not the other way around. Tevye's delight in regaining his daughter nearly dwarfs the pain of his exile from the town where he has lived and loved and buried his wife.

Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*

Set in the 1920s amid the pushcart peddlers of New York City's Lower East Side, *Bread Givers* may feature one of the most monstrous fathers in all of world literature. An Orthodox rabbi, he allows his five young daughters to starve while he eats well; he lives off their labor, refusing to work for a living himself; and he crushes any hopes they have of marrying the men they love, instead arranging marriages to men who are old, cruel, foolish, or all three. He also maltreats his loving wife, who waits on him hand and foot, and when she dies a miserable death, he remarries a month later. And all this while insisting on his own moral, intellectual, and social superiority.

Even worse, if possible, is his utter disdain for women in general and for his daughters in particular. Not only does he treat them as instruments of his own comfort, but he also has an utter lack of faith in his daughter's capacities to do anything but serve men. When



Sara, the novel's heroine, the youngest and most independent of the daughters, wants to leave and get an education, he curses her and wishes her ill.

For Yeziarska, this struggle between father and daughter has more significance than simply a personal story of individual liberation or one woman's happiness. The novel is subtitled "The Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New," and many of the father's seemingly inexcusable and inexplicable decisions and decrees are, in fact, grounded in his unblinking acceptance of traditional Eastern European mores.

This is not to say that the New World is entirely free from blame in Yeziarska's eyes. Sounding a typical theme of Jewish immigrant literature of the time, Yeziarska's pages are filled with "bluffers" and frauds: The "diamond dealer" to whom the father marries Mashah, for example, turns out to be far less than what he presented himself to be. And when Fania marries a wealthy man and goes out to the West Coast, we are invited to see her pampered, empty existence as a criticism of American materialism. But overall, the lines are clearly drawn: As bad as things may be at times in America, there is hope for improvement, even if one is a woman; the old system, on the other hand, is merely a trap.

The possibility of transformation comes primarily through the twin "American" virtues of hard work and education—or, more precisely, hard work so one can afford an education. The \$1,000 Sara earns writing an essay on the value of her college education allows her to become an English teacher, a purveyor of education in the country's native language. Not only does Sara find status, but she finds love, too, with her school's principal, a man whom she willingly acknowledges as her superior in learning, judgment, and even morality. Many critics have noted that Yeziarska's feminism seems to stop at the marriage canopy, and though it is not quite fair to suggest that Sara exchanges subordination to one man for another, the novel's ending reminds us that even the most rebellious authors are not free from the conventions of their time.

Johanna Kaplan, *O My America!*

Is Merry Slavin to be envied or to be pitied for having Ezra Slavin as a father? *O My America!*, Johanna Kaplan's first novel, dedicates its entirety to the question, and ultimately refuses to come up with a definitive answer; instead, it creates indelible portraits of two characters in a story that spans the better part of the 20th century.

From the very first pages of the novel, we learn along with Merry that Ezra Slavin, visiting professor of American Studies at Amherst, old and stalwart member of the left, guru to America's disaffected youth, has just died; though the novel ends just a few days later, at Slavin's funeral service, Merry's memories, thoughts, and encounters—along with those of a few others—provide us a lifetime's worth of evidence about her father.

Slavin is brilliant, erudite, impassioned, compassionate, caring—at least, to the world at large. As a family man, he is almost entirely absent; when Merry's mother dies giving birth to her, he abandons her to his grandmother for years, and has no relationship with Merry's older brother, adopted by a distant relative. When not detached, he is emotionally manipulative; whether intentionally or unintentionally, he plays with his daughters' affections during every encounter, preferring to be right rather than affectionate. Or, perhaps



more precisely, to be more affectionate—to be closer to his children and his family than to anyone else. For Ezra, after all, the whole world needs to be taught and cared for.

As a result, Merry—who is, often, not particularly so—seems, for most of the novel, to lie firmly within her father's gigantic shadow; mistaken often for one of his young girlfriends or wives, or roundly ignored until her relationship with the great man is uncovered, she seems to pass through life without taking a stand, fighting the great fight, or indeed doing any of the things that Ezra is so universally praised for doing and for teaching. And yet, the novel pays (perhaps overly) gleeful witness to an almost universal parade of members of Merry's generation who have turned on, tuned in, dropped out, and self-destructed; Merry's half-sister Ffrenchy (sic) is a particularly delightful comic concoction, combining inane New Age-y doubletalk with a shocking selfishness and indifference to anything but her own happiness. Only Merry, as Ezra notes on one occasion, has her priorities and her sense of self intact; and it is Merry who seems to serve as Ezra's longest-standing and most critical conversation partner. Ezra may indeed see Merry as his greatest—perhaps his only—accomplishment, as he looks about and sees a sixties generation that, in his view, all too often mistakes passion for commitment and considers emotion as a legitimate substitute for education. The question the novel raises is how well Merry realizes this, and, indeed, whether that realization is enough.

Slavin becomes famous for insisting that he does not want to be known for singing any more American songs; but, as the title of the book suggests, Slavin is a man whose speeches, whose very person, was about creating that song, that dream of an ideal America so far from the disappointment he saw all around him. Ezra may have known, though—as Johanna Kaplan certainly does—that Merry is both his best audience and his America to boot.

Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*

In *American Pastoral*, which won Philip Roth the 1997 Pulitzer Prize, Nathan Zuckerman tells the story of his childhood hero, Swede Levov, whose golden exterior conceals the great tragedy in his past—his daughter Merry was implicated in the bombing of their local post office as a protest against the Vietnam War and has gone underground. Roth clearly draws on documented stories of children from educated, well-off Jewish families who, in their radical protests, joined violent groups like the Weathermen. But *American Pastoral* is more than an evocation of historical events: It is a piercing analysis of the consequences of Jewish empowerment and acculturation in America.

From an early age, Swede Levov is everyone's idea of a classic American. He is a natural athlete, skilled at football and baseball; he marries a non-Jewish girl, a former Miss New Jersey; though he works in his father's glove factory, he moves to genteel and gentile Old Rimrock. In contrast to his hot-tempered brother, Swede is restrained, unwilling or unable to display emotion, always rational. His idyllic, carefree existence, set in and around nature, fulfills the very definition of the pastoral: The Jew, who in America is seen as urban, cosmopolitan, anti-nature, has managed to transform himself.

But as the story shifts from Swede's successes to his disastrous relationship with his daughter, we see how the golden dreams of Jewish American assimilation take on a darker



hue. Though Swede Levov may have managed to make his way into Old Rimrock, his daughter finds it impossible to make her life there. Merry, ironically named, begins her life screaming inconsolably. Her constant opposition—whether dramatized in infantile colic, an adolescent stutter, or religious passivity—illustrates how transitory, how illusory, Levov's transformation really is.

In the encounter between Swede and Merry, we see the encounter between parents and children of the sixties writ large as both an American struggle and a Jewish one. Rita Cohen, Levov's *bête noire*, suggests to him that his wife never got used to being the mother of a Jew despite being the wife of one. Levov's protests aside, we are left wondering how much the dynamics of Jewish acculturation—this far is possible, but after that the pendulum swings the other way, and with a vengeance—are being expressed in Roth's morality tale. The story pierces, though, because of its particularity: Swede's internal agonies, his unending speculations, his psychic trauma over his daughter's whereabouts, her actions, and most important her motives pervade the novel. Was she led astray by others? What responsibility does he as a father have in this tragedy? Is it because he was overprotective? Underprotective?

Ultimately, the novel refuses to answer that question, and does so because of a particular opinion it holds about the impossibility of knowledge and understanding when it comes to history or biography. Gloves, the Levovs' business, function as a metaphor throughout: Every person is covered by a second skin that seems to reflect the shape of the actual character within but conceals far more than it reveals. Life, Zuckerman reflects, is constantly about getting things wrong, about misunderstanding people, motives, and events—about mistaking the glove for the hand.

Myla Goldberg, *Bee Season*

When 9-year-old Eliza Naumann wins first prize in her school spelling bee, her father, Saul, a cantor, quickly forgets his brainy son, Aaron, and his distant wife, Miriam. He introduces Eliza to the work of medieval scholar Abraham Abulafia, the author of a treatise on the mystical relationship between language and the divine, which he hopes will help her win the national competition. As Eliza goes from being a disappointment to the apple of her father's eye to being a disappointment once again, we are led to understand that Eliza's navigation of this process is as much about her growing maturity and independence as it is about her scaling mystic heights.

At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Saul's study, a sacrosanct place where children are not allowed to knock, much less to enter. (When Eliza wins her first contest, she simply slips a note under the door.) But like Mr. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, Saul opens his study to a remarkable daughter as the novel advances. By the end of the book, Eliza (who shares a name with that earlier daughter) is spending more and more time in the study, working together with her father, who grants her more and more obscure and precious texts. Ultimately, however, Eliza realizes that her father is living out his own dream, not hers. What was once joy for Eliza becomes, at times, wearisome duty, while following the mystical path her father sets for her leads to a kind of mental overload.

Eliza might not have lavished such psychic attention on her father were it not for the vast gulf between her and her mother and the ever increasing one between her and her brother. For most of the novel, we are invited to see Miriam as a career-obsessed intellectual with little time for her children. Similarly, Goldberg shows how puberty widens the six-year distance between Eliza and Aaron and the disillusionment Eliza feels when she discovers that her brother is not, after all, a superhero but just a kid—and a bullied one at that. Aaron, in turn, feels abandoned when his father discontinues their nightly guitar lessons so he can spend the time studying with Eliza. Goldberg wonderfully points out the hyperattentiveness children have to the smallest shifts in parental attention, and the complex mixture of joy and guilt, or despair and self-loathing that attend such shifts.

But while Miriam's descent into illness and Aaron's religious conversion are well-observed, it is the father-daughter story we remember. The last word spelled in this novel of words is origami, and it neatly describes the pair's relationship: beautiful, complex, and filled with sharp edges that stab if one fails to take care.

Background Literature

The following scholarly and literary works were referenced in the essay and are recommended for those who would like to explore the themes and subjects discussed in greater depth.

The Weekly Midrash: The Tsene rene

In the early 17th century, Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi integrated stories from the Torah with rabbinical commentary to create the *Tsene rene* (Hebrew for "let's go out and see"), a Yiddish "bible," mainly intended for women. It proved a phenomenal success, and went through over 200 editions.

Alice Bach, ed. *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*

Bach draws together some of the recent scholarship on the mothers, daughters, and wives who populate the Hebrew Bible. Influenced by the feminist movement, many of the essays here pay particular attention to the voices dampened or left on the margins of the classic and conventional biblical tales.

David Bergelson, *When All Is Said and Done*

In this novel by the most talented prose stylist in modern Yiddish literature, Mirl Hurwitz, the rich, somewhat spoiled protagonist, is not satisfied with her life as it is, but is not certain what she would like it to be, either. Bergelson's indictment of the "uprooted" and alienated in Jewish society at the turn of the century is still compelling today.

Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Swartz, and Margie Wolfe, ed. *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*

Female prose writers in Yiddish literature are doubly cursed: like most of their male counterparts, their work rarely attracts the general reader; at the same time, their contributions have often been overlooked by specialists and translators. This anthology attempts to address this imbalance, including stories that examine the fabric of Eastern European and immigrant Jewish life.

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The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln

Glückel of Hameln was in no way an average woman of the 17th century. She ran an international business empire, for one thing; for another, she wrote a series of remarkable memoirs—designed, in all probability, as a form of ethical will for her children—in which she tells us her life story and gives us an insight into the experiences of daughters in Jewish society. Her *Memoirs* are both a remarkable historical document and a fascinating look at one family.

Kathryn Hellerstein, ed. *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*

One of the most talented poets in modern Yiddish literature, Molodowsky, who immigrated to the United States in the early part of the century, was fascinated with the question of women's poetry and women's songs. In this bilingual collection, ably translated by Hellerstein, she displays a distinctly female voice while taking on topics of tradition, European life, and her new home in New York City, where "the sky and an iron city/engaged in conversation."

Esther Kreitman, *Deborah*

Kreitman was the sister of the well known Yiddish writers Isaac Bashevis Singer and Israel Joshua Singer. In this quasi-autobiographical novel, she visits the same household that the two depicted in memoirs of their own, and presents it from a daughter's point of view. The picture—of an unloved girl whose talents go unrecognized—is markedly different and highly damning.

I.B. Singer, *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy*

Yentl's father raised her as a man, teaching her Talmud and treating her as an intellectual equal; is it any wonder that when he dies, she is dissatisfied with the traditional woman's life that lay before her? Singer's novella has become famous in its Broadway and Hollywood incarnations; the literary original, though, is more complex than either of its adaptations, going beyond social critique to explore the deepest questions of sex and gender.

Recommended Reading

The following works of literature also explore the theme of fathers and daughters in a changing world and are recommended for those who are interested in continuing to read and discuss books on this theme.

Dvora Baron, *The First Day and Other Stories*

The Hebrew intellectual establishment couldn't get enough of Dvora Baron when she first published her stories in the early 20th century: How could a woman write such erudite Hebrew, the language of (at that time) an educated male elite? Baron, educated by her father, produced a body of intelligent, powerful stories that spoke to women's ambivalent place in traditional Jewish society, and became one of the cornerstones of modern Hebrew literature.

Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*

Many readers have encountered Frank's diary in school, as an emblematic story of the Holocaust. But the book is also an unflinching look at the artistic, sexual, and emotional development of a young woman, in which her mother and father loom far larger than the forces keeping her in the "secret annex." It is a work that repays rereading.

Esther Freud, *Summer at Gaglow*

In this novel, Esther Freud (the daughter of the painter Lucien Freud) tells the story of a wealthy Berlin family during World War I and their present-day descendent, Sarah Linder, pregnant with her first child and estranged from her boyfriend. When her artist father reveals that Gaglow, an East German country estate, will be returned to their family, Sarah attempts to learn about the estate—and the family's history—revealing that the daughter has an artistry of her own.

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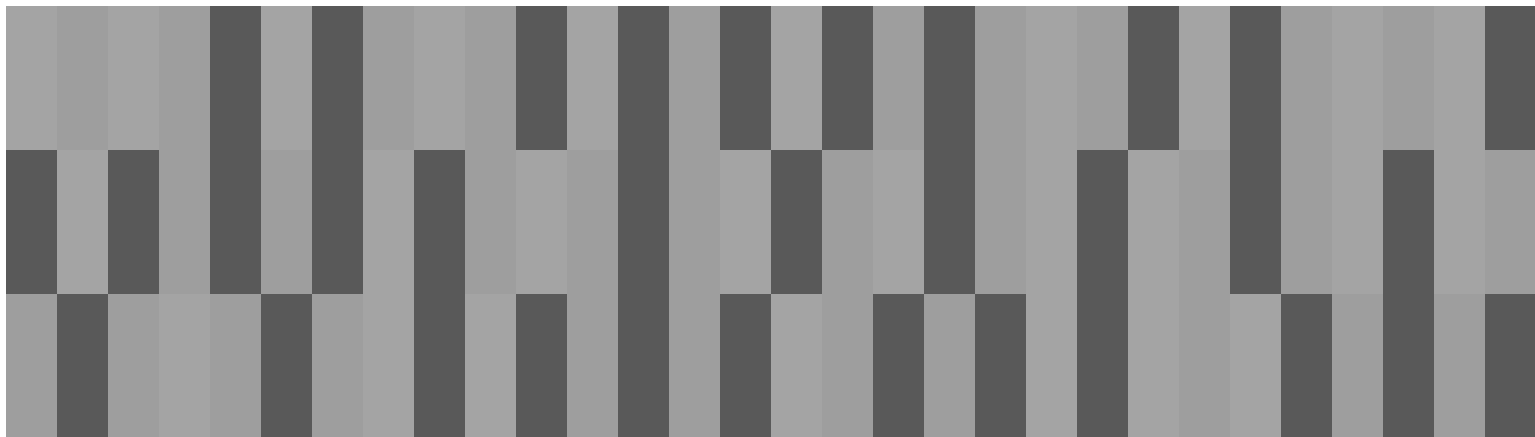
Herman Wouk, *Marjorie Morningstar*

An entire generation of readers grew up idolizing Marjorie Morningstar, who attempted to break free of the conventional, staid expectations of her father and mother and find her own glamorous and fulfilling existence. Yes, the novel may seem a bit dated, but it remains an absorbing and entertaining read.

Jeremy Dauber

Jeremy Dauber is the Atran Assistant Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at Columbia University. He graduated from Harvard College and did his doctoral work at Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. His first book, *Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Jewish Literature*, was published by Stanford University Press. He was also the project director of the National Yiddish Book Center's "Great Jewish Books" project and has given lectures on Jewish literature around the country. In addition, he writes an on-line column on television and movies for the *Christian Science Monitor*, for which he received an award from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists in 2003.

We are always looking for the book it is necessary to read next. SAUL BELLOW



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