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Messiah, American Style: Mordecai Manuel Noah and the American Refuge,

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In Nava Semel's novel *Iyisrael*, one of the characters also reflects upon an almost entirely forgotten "half-mad playwright. . . who dreamed up the dizzy idea of establishing a state for the Jews" yet "whose name no one knows today" (265).

In Semel's novel, however, the reference is not to Noah but to Theodor Herzl. In the alternate universe of *Iyisrael*, Herzl has died in obscurity. Noah, on the other hand, successfully established his city of refuge which, in the year 2001 of this alternate timestream, has existed successfully both as a Jewish state and a member of the American republic for 176 years. Other authors—Zangwill, Twersky, Katchor—imagined what might have happened had one or two Jews actually responded to Noah's call. But no one, not even Katchor, has endeavored novelistically to imagine what Jewish history and Jewish identity might be like today had the persecuted Jews of the world come to live on Grand Island in the State of New York. This is the novelty of Semel's often cleverly inventive, thought-provoking, and deeply touching novel—her anti-*Altneuland*, as it were.

Semel's novel is a meditation on Jewish and Israeli identity, as they connect with homeland, refuge, physical and spiritual survival. Like Katchor, Semel also wants to know whether there is such a thing as Jewish identity, and in what it consists. Yet the contrast between these two latter-day Noah-books could not be greater. Unlike Katchor, Semel is convinced that there is such a thing as Jewish identity, and that it is deeply and complexly intertwined with what it means to be Israeli. As one of the non-Jewish characters in the novel asks himself: "What kind of Jews are these Israelis?" (36). Or as we might elaborate upon the question, as Semel does novelistically: would a different history—one without the State of Israel and with a Diasporic yet physically secure, territorial Jewish existence—create a different Jewish

people? And is Israeliness therefore an accident, something not intrinsically connected with Jewishness? Would Diaspora itself mean something different under such circumstances? What is the Jewishness that inheres in Israeliness, and that can maintain its commonality even in such an alternate history? To begin to answer these questions, Semel conducts an experiment, with her parallel universe as an imaginative control group, as it were, for the Jewish people, dismantling Israel and Israeli Jewishness in order to see what remains, to discover the common Jewish substrates. Semel's purpose is not didactic, but observational: one does not conclude the novel with a final, articulated definition of Jewishness. Yet neither is her exercise in historical deconstruction an anti-Zionist exercise in wiping clean the Jewish slate (State). By imagining the absence of Israel—this is the wordplay of the novel's title, which can mean both Isra-Island (the name given to Noah's state in the alternative universe) and Not-Israel—Semel wishes to approach more profoundly what her country is and means.

This exercise is the last of a three-part novel. In the first part, which takes place in September 2001 of our own universe, Semel imagines an Israeli descendent of Noah discovering his forebear's title deed to Grand Island, and running off to see what is now a bedroom community of Buffalo, New York. The episode allows for the non-Jewish police detective, asked by the Israeli consulate to locate their missing citizen, to pose questions about Jews, about Israel, about Jewish and Israeli identity, as he attempts to track down the Israeli. The second part takes place in September 1825, in the week before the inauguration ceremony for Ararat. Here, Semel imagines Noah visiting Grand Island in the company of a Native American girl, the last native inhabitant of the island. This middle section is understood to be the pivot of the novel: the decisions of the two characters, Noah and Little Dove, determine whether or not history arrives at the events of part one, in our own universe, or part three, which takes place in September 2001 of this alternate timestream. Similar characters, themes, and situations crop up in all three sections, their variations creating sometimes uncanny effects. Most striking, perhaps, is the focus on Native Americans as Jewish parallels, a motif that returns us to Zangwill's story, and to the American Hebraists' frequent, if implicit, comparisons of Jews and Indians. The detective of part one is of Native American descent, but is in flight from ethnic roots, and keeps up a running mental dialogue with his deceased Native American grandmother, who becomes increasingly intertwined in his head with the deceased

Jewish father of Noah's Israeli descendent. The second part, as we have said, rests upon the encounter between Noah and Little Dove during the course of what is to be her last night on her people's island. And the Jewish state of part three is, we discover, a fusion of Jewish and Native American culture, exemplified by the state flag (a Magen David above elm leaves) and bar mitzvah ceremonies modelled on Native American vision quests.

Historically—if that is the word one uses when referring to the alternative history of part three—the consequences of Noah's success in establishing his Jewish state are enormous. As noted, the State of Israel never came into existence. (The Middle East is described by one character as a sleepy and boring region, never in the news.) Moreover, according to the logic of the novel, the presence of Noah's Jewish state not only means the non-existence of Israel, it also means the non-occurrence of the other major event of modern Jewish history, the Holocaust. While in this alternate history the Nazis were able to vent their hatred upon gypsies, homosexuals, political dissidents, and the disabled, the Jews of Europe were able to leave and come to the United States, because they were admitted into the Jewish refuge of Iyisrael. Indeed, Noah's impulse for creating his Jewish refuge is, Semel indicates in the first two sections of the novel, his quasi-prophetic fear of the Holocaust, about which he has nightmares in part two, and to which he alludes in the title deed that resurfaces in part one. Far more than Twersky's or Katchor's books, Semel's novel presents us with a post-Holocaust Noah, his name alluding to the most horrific deluge in Jewish history. The non-occurrence of the Holocaust in part three is at least as central to the logic and effect of the novel—its ability to ponder the nature of modern Jewish identity—as the non-existence of the State of Israel.

Given these vast historical differences, one is struck by the continuities and similarities that remain. Normalcy continues to elude Jewish existence, which even in its Iyisraeli form is marked by unease, by exile and difference. Noah's utopianism has had considerable success in providing a refuge for Jews, but only upon the small space of Grand Island. Antisemitism still exists. Violent hatred yet stalks the earth—both the first and third parts of the novel are punctuated by the mass-murder of 9/11—and Jews are still seen as outsiders in the world beyond Iyisrael. There is no Arab-Israeli conflict in this alternate universe, yet the Jewish possession of Grand Island, which was formerly Native American territory, is not uncontested either, suggesting that when people refuse to grant refuge to those in need, only hatred can be the result.

Throughout all of this, the question of how the State of Israel is and is not reflected in Iyisrael is constant. Liam Emmanuel, the descendent of Noah in part one, insists that the differences are fundamental: “in contrast to Grand Island, Liam Emmanuel explained . . . Israel was from the beginning the place of [the Jews’] heart’s desire, from which they had been forcibly uprooted” (113). Yet the novel incessantly works over the motif and implications of the refuge—often using the Yiddish term “boydem” (attic)—a tiny hiding place, posing the question of whether the State of Israel is also a kind of boydem for the Jews. What, Semel asks, is the difference between homeland and refuge, state and boydem?

The method of the novel is the intricate working and reworking of its themes, often highlighted by ironic variations of Biblical quotations now fit to a world without Zionism and Israel, a world in which refuge and not return—*miqlat tsion*, not *shivat tsion*—is the modern Jewish collective call. The three parts are not wholly separate, but uncanny repetitions of the same encounters and events in new clothes. The effect is like a sestina in prose. However, the novel has its limitations and flaws. Some characters are drawn either as ciphers or as stereotypes: the hard-bitten, thrice-divorced, Jack Daniels-swilling New York police detective of part one is an invention of television, not the literary imagination. Native American themes in particular, for being so central to the novel, are sometimes deployed with delightful surprise, but sometimes with stale convention and what one otherwise positive reviewer has called a “somewhat New Age-y current” (Goldschmid). While sympathetic, Little Dove of part two is a recycled Pocahontas, the melancholy but dutiful princess of the dying tribe. Native culture includes elements from tribal peoples that never lived in the northeastern United States. Perhaps intentionally, there is no overt consideration of American Jewry as having positive value or culture in its own right: American motifs circle around Indians, New York City, Ararat-Grand Island-Iyisrael, and the legacies of oppression, racism, and slavery. (One character in part two would seem to be the ultimate Dead White Male—he is a cruel slaveowner, fanatical Christian, sexual harrasser, racist, Indian-hater, and antisemite—and as such comes across as something of a cartoon rather than a real example of evil.) If the presence of Iyisrael is an opportunity for Semel to consider the absence of Israel, it does not seem

similarly to require a consideration of the absence of an American Jewry as we know it today.¹

The stakes of the novel rest upon how we read the conclusion to the third part, which, without giving too much of the novel away, involves a replay of the 9/11 attack that heartbreakingly closes the first part. Neither ending reduces to ideological allegory, yet both operate by implicitly and poignantly juxtaposing individual loss and collective fate. While we leave the grieving lover of the first part in lower Manhattan, adding another “Have you seen...?” flyer to the masses we remember, the surviving member of the couple in part three wanders “the shoreline between Jaffa and Gaza” (273)—i.e., the space of Israel’s absence. This latter shiva is Semel’s final unraveling of the State of Israel, the elimination of the collective and the national, its territory entirely individual: even the Arab woman who joins in the bereaved lover’s kaddish prayer is absent in the final line. The land of Israel is now random shoreline, given meaning only momentarily through the mourning gesture of the character, and—for the reader—the ironic knowledge of what is missing. I do not think it accidental that the main difference between the conclusion of part three and part one in this regard, is that part one (like part two) ends with a child in the picture. However hopeful and moving, part three offers no such procreative continuation, which seems highly significant. Again: it would be a mistake to read this as ideological allegory. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the alternate reality of part three, of Noah’s Iyisrael, is linked to this final reduction to the individual, without nation, without peoplehood, without future. And yet this is the nature of alternate histories, which are inherently sad. They posit the stillbirth of the reality we know, and haunt us with the extinction of lives that might have been.

...And, in recent years, we have seen Noah and his Ararat plan smouldering among the embers of ethnic consciousness in Katchor’s graphic novel, and resurrected

¹ Interestingly, Semel has explained that she began to create fiction when, as a girl, she had the responsibility for accompanying her then-blind grandfather on walks. Her grandfather, an inveterate anti-Zionist who would have preferred to live in the United States, constantly denigrated anything in Tel Aviv his granddaughter described to him, declaring it less impressive than what he had known in New York City. In response, the young Semel began to embellish and exaggerate the urban wonders of Tel Aviv to her blind grandfather, so that what she described might compare more favorably to America. See Lurie for the full tale.

through Semel's imaginative dismantling of modern Jewish history in order to find the *ding an sich* of Jewishness and reaffirm Israel's connection with Jewish and human destiny. Like other Jewish messiah-figures, from Jesus to Shabbetai Zvi, Noah compels the imagination, yet he does so in an American context all his own.

Note: all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.