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Winter 2008

## Unruly Difference: the Politics of Stigma and the Space of the Sacred

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### Recommended Citation

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**UNRULY DIFFERENCE:  
THE POLITICS OF STIGMA AND THE SPACE OF THE SACRED**

**In Plays of Tony Kushner,  
Martin Sherman and Deb Margolin**

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A threadbare garment, a feather announcing the angel of history, a messiah who should never have come. These images form a delicate lace of connections in the work of three contemporary playwrights who re-imagine Jewish otherness and grapple with the meaning of faith. Tony Kushner, Martin Sherman and Deb Margolin are iconoclasts who challenge the hegemony of hierarchy, pose questions about the limits of reason and explore alternatives to mainstream Judaism. Breaking from the concerns of their theatrical predecessors, these playwrights draw on profoundly Jewish concepts and reconfigure narratives of redemption, obligation, ethical community, and the Messianic end-of-days. In highly original ways, they grapple with Judaism, asking fundamental questions about Jewish American identity in its political, cultural and spiritual dimensions. These three playwrights, having begun to interrogate Judaism in newly provocative and “unruly” ways, break from the long tradition of Jewish American theatre,

Jews have made enormous contributions to American theatre since the late 1800s, but the trajectory of those contributions has been marked by an erasure of Jewish particularity.<sup>1</sup> By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century “familiar markers of Jewish identity [in the culture at large] were eroding.”<sup>2</sup> The theatre responded to a “policy of Jewish invisibility [that] pressured theater owners and managers to limit racial portrayals of Jews and promoted legislation to restrict certain characterizations of Jews onstage. By World War I, such efforts had largely succeeded in banishing the stage Jew from the American theater.”<sup>3</sup>

But the disappearance of the stage Jew may be largely attributed to Jewish audiences and playwrights, responding to inner pressures as much as to societal norms. Tracing a line from Yiddish drama, which Sarah Blacher Cohen describes as the “immediate ancestor of Jewish-American drama,” Jewish playwrights were propelled away from Jewishness as they entered the cultural mainstream in force.<sup>4</sup> Their audiences, “the newly assimilated Eastern European Jews of the 1920s did not want Jewish-American dramatists to depict them as significantly different from their fellow Americans.”<sup>5</sup> Given these realities, it is clear why, as Stephen J. Whitfield explains, “For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jewishness as an explicit subject was mostly concealed.”<sup>6</sup> Increasingly unmoored from religious training, knowledge and faith, Jewish writers wrote with an eye toward universal appeal. From Elmer Rice to Clifford Odets through Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller, Jewish American playwrights disguised, subordinated, eschewed, or ignored their roots.

Nonetheless, the contributions of these and other major Jewish American playwrights have often been shaped, albeit implicitly, by an often varied Jewish legacy. Only recently, however, have these Jewish playwrights begun to search explicitly within the Jewish tradition for a usable past. And in that sense, the three writers we study here represent a radical departure from earlier Jewish-American theater. At the same time, what they have undertaken is an unorthodox approach to Jewish spirituality and otherness, linked and defined in tandem. As Whitfield says, “Only religion can form the inspirational core of a viable and meaningful Jewish culture. Its fate depends on faith.”<sup>7</sup> The plays we look at here are, we argue, first stirrings of a re-imagined faith. Their three authors are drawn to the spiritual legacy and cultural reach of Judaism, even as they question the limitations of tradition and law. Working in new idioms, they refute discourses of dominance and test those paradigms of assimilation, conformity, and coalescence which they feel characterize modern Jewish-American life. In so doing, they re-imagine an inclusive spirituality that finds inspiration in a disposition of “unruly difference,” as we discuss below.

Sander L. Gilman has elucidated the idea of Jewish difference as primarily social, “. . . the inability to integrate into a society, to be able to claim true command over language, culture, and physical difference.”<sup>8</sup> The constellation of the plays we look at here claim *difference* as a definitive Jewish value, extending it into a sensibility of *unruly difference*, to use Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin’s evocative phrase.<sup>9</sup> We will follow this trope of unruly difference from its value as socio-political critique to its ramifications for spiritual renewal, on to a synthesis that embraces both, in glimpse of what Jill Dolan calls “utopic possibility.”<sup>10</sup> The plays we examine traverse themes of faith, identity and assertive (‘unruly’) difference in a firm departure from the earlier (less than openly Jewish) preoccupations of Jewish American theater.

Our study of this sensibility of difference is guided in part by cultural historian Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, which develops a sophisticated set of interlocking theses about diaspora, race, identity and culture. Black cultural expression, with its roots in slavery, knits together political and spiritual aspirations; it stands, in Gilroy’s words, “in contra-distinction to the Enlightenment assumption of a fundamental separation between art and life.”<sup>11</sup> Black vernacular arts refute the supposed rationality that legitimated racial terror and violent subjugation and, instead, perform a life-affirming, utopian “politics of transfiguration.”<sup>12</sup> “Art’s Utopia, the counterfactual yet-to-come, is draped in black. It . . . is a kind of imaginary restitution of that catastrophe, which is world history.”<sup>13</sup> Gilroy hears the birth-cry of utopia born from the children of slaves, as from the children of Auschwitz. Following Gilroy, we consider three Jewish artists who gesture toward a politics of transfiguration, embracing ontological otherness in a search for the yet-to-come. Their messianic yearnings and one-way debates with God are cries against the grain; they too incline toward a restitution of history to inaugurate a better future.

## **THE POLITICS OF *DIFFERENCE***

A long-standing claim has been that Jews owe their survival as a people to the binding effects of hatred. Famously, Jean Paul Sartre asserts in *Anti-Semitism and the Jew*, the “sole tie that binds [the Jews] is the hostility and disdain of the societies which

surround them.”<sup>14</sup> As off-putting as this formulation may be on its surface, linking Jewish persistence to victim-hood, it serves to underscore how Jewish identity may be inescapably bound up with the image of the eternal outsider and with the Jews’ own sense of marginality and alterity. Boyarin and Boyarin, following a long tradition of scholarship, elegantly describe how Christian identity was predicated on the rejection of Judaism. The fulfillment of Judaism is Christianity; true Jews, “renounced *difference* [Judaism] and entered into the body of Christ.” Jews who call themselves Jews are not “real Jews,” who in the words of Paul in Romans 9-11, are those who accept Christian embrace. “Thus, *Jew* became a symbol of universalism [as potential Christian] and at the same time, a symbol of unruly difference.”<sup>15</sup>

Difference is “associated with discord and disorder;” to stand apart from the Church’s universal message is to oppose decency, community, and Christ himself.<sup>16</sup> Theologically, Jews, by virtue of being what they were said to be, *defined* difference, but eventually, difference was explained racially and, in our day, ethnically.<sup>17</sup> Yet, as the Boyarins continue, in the modern world, Jewish success has so often been predicated on an absorption that required a gradual dissolution of the particular ties of heritage, what they denote as *deculturation*.<sup>18</sup> Gentler than *deracination*, the term implies more than accommodation. Culture is stripped away, political ground ceded, spiritual foundations weakened, community as such prepares itself to disappear.

This picture applies particularly to those immigrant Jews who had strong incentives to escape the image that they saw as having handicapped their past, those for whom tradition carried no social currency. To the contrary, anything that made Jews conspicuously different worked against ambition. For many European Jews, as Barry Rubin writes in *Assimilation and Its Discontents*, “Being Jewish brought penalties and humiliation without material rewards.”<sup>19</sup> Some were ambivalent, others more vigilant in distancing their children from a tradition, which, as they saw it, seemed to offer little more than humiliation and pain. The loss was profound: “The parents disregard for [religious] forms made the next generation ignorant about content and the one thereafter forgetful of everything. The meaning of being a Jew was defined ever downwards.”<sup>20</sup>

That meant a loss. In the words of Gerda Lerner, groups that deny their history “have suffered a distortion of self-perception and a sense of inferiority based on the denigration of the communal experience of the group to which they belong.”<sup>21</sup> Novelist Anne Roiphe, in her memoir *Generation without Memory*, is terse and eloquent: “Homogenization without shame is impossible.”<sup>22</sup> She sees the Jewish desire to lose the accent, to have a so-called good nose, like the black desire for good hair (meaning, in both cases, having features that conform to an idealized Caucasian formulaic), as rejections of the self and others who share those characteristics you reject. The playwrights we are about to examine are moving the other way. They are revisiting and, indeed, revising in their own image the content of Judaism, questioning the parameters of exclusion and belonging, and the uses of the Jewish past.

### **TONY KUSHNER: A WORLD OF *DIFFERENCE***

“...we must learn to recognize and respect Difference and what it tells us about the infinite complexities of human behavior—recognize and respect Difference, not just tolerate it. The foregrounding of such respect is social justice.”<sup>23</sup>

The assertion of difference, as both an ontological condition and a political good, has its analogue in the embrace of one's status as Other. However limited and partial is the image of the Jew as Eternal Other, it is a useful point of departure in trying to understand the sense of renewed affiliation that Jewish progressives, feminists, gays and lesbians express as they negotiate the terms of that affiliation. A proliferation of books, films and plays attest that an assertive and self-confident gay Jewish identity—unapologetic, outspoken and self-aware—is developing. Playwright Tony Kushner, gay, Jewish, and politically aware, has been especially vocal in his discussion of double minority status as a rich source of political and aesthetic insight.

To say that Kushner is a gay playwright or a Jewish playwright diminishes him; he is both, but it is more truthful to say he *is* neither. He is a writer whose world-view is shaped by his intellect, passion, social location and commitment; being Jewish and gay are frames of reference, central but not definitive. They are strands in the tapestry of his

work; overlapping and informing each other, still leaving *spaces between* in the weave. However, the moral frameworks and theoretical foundations that ground and temper Kushner's plays can be traced in some part to a negotiation of multiple, intersecting identities. By virtue of their marginality (symbolic and real), these affiliations reinforce the idea of *difference* as unruly and politically potent; identity indexes difference and, as such, functions as a locus of resistance.

It is useful to ask: *in what way* is Kushner a Jewish playwright? A great deal has been written (by others, as well as by Kushner himself) about his treatment of gay themes. But how does Kushner understand the impact of Jewish heritage on his writing; what aspects are salient, what does he value, what ignore? What do his writings reflect, select, or emphasize; in what ways does Jewish heritage inform and inflect his work? What, if anything, does it say about being a Jew in America? Does his Jewish heritage contribute to his moral and ethical grounding, his political stance? What is the spiritual dimension of his work and how is it shaped by Jewish *difference*? The ambivalence and partialness of his identification as a Jew adds to the complexity of his writing and to its value as a cultural indicator.

The point is not that Kushner or any other writer can define or delimit what it means to be Jewish; rather, it is to ask what that identity means for the writer and so gain a degree of insight into contemporary modulations of that identity. Kushner's plays are peppered with Yiddish and riddled with Hebrew; echoes of Jewish tradition are found throughout; many of their themes and preoccupations chime with Jewish cultural, political, and in the final analysis, spiritual experience. Kushner himself says one of his goals in *Angels in America* was "bringing forth a fecund and highly dynamic new Jewish identity."<sup>24</sup>

One locus of Kushner's identification is Yiddishkeit, which operates not only as a linguistic and cultural legacy, and as a political polestar. Paul Buhle, in *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood* writes: "Tony Kushner has described the pained humor of the

much awarded *Angels in America* as extremely Yiddish, its contents as the imaginative rearrangement of old parts, its architecture as the mixture of the new and old, novelty and truth, and perhaps most of all, its striving to overcome the great American myth of individualism." <sup>25</sup>

According to Henry Bial, Kushner sees Jewish identity as dynamic, in flux, essentially unstable. "It is Louis [Ironson, a Jewish character in *Angels in America*]'s anxiety, his unfulfilled and perhaps unfulfillable desire to reconcile 5000 years of history, ethics, and ritual with the demands of an ever-changing and uncertain future that for Kushner is the quintessence of acting Jewish." <sup>26</sup> This squares with what Jonathan Boyarin calls critical post-Judaism: "an already existing but unidentified commonality" which seeks to authenticate a relation to Judaism in ways that obviate the restrictions and definitions of earlier times.<sup>27</sup> As he looks for a meaningful relationship to Judaism, Kushner is among those who search for ethical anchors that apply to a progressive and inclusive world-view.

The embrace of alterity as a political position does not necessarily marginalize an artist; Kushner wants to reach a broad audience. "I consider myself to be a mainstream writer," he says. "I have never really aspired to working in the cultural margins." <sup>28</sup> Indeed, his plays are structurally traditional, with identifiable characters, and linear plots that accomplish narrative closure. But the juxtaposition and intercutting of scenes, the gender-switching, and a layering of realism and fantasy, are techniques that deliberately keep reason off-balance and undercut the grand narratives of the West.

Clearly, Kushner's strong identification with the outsider is strengthened by his Judaism. The touchstone of his plays, what seems to be Kushner himself says one of his goals in *Angels* was "bringing forth a fecund and highly dynamic new Jewish identity." <sup>29</sup> the taproot of his Jewish identity, is a visceral understanding of *marginality*; as a double minority, he is a doubly an outsider (though as a successful artist he is a *privileged* outsider whose position, oscillating between center and periphery, offers a useful vantage point for critical analysis.) "The model I used in the process of coming out was



everything I knew about Jewish experience in the twentieth century.”<sup>30</sup> In coming out to his politically progressive family, he drew on his father’s belief (which Kushner shares) that “Jews do badly when they try to pretend to not be Jews.”<sup>31</sup>

Like homosexuals, Jews can “pass” - but invisibility is a devil’s bargain. Public assertion of selfhood is an act of courage, essential to psychological integration; it is also a political act. As a gay man, Kushner is aware of both the personal and political necessity of unapologetic self-affirmation. The alternative, self-negation, damages the individual and dis-empowers the group. Kushner is articulate in his condemnation of self-effacement. To reject the parts of the self that offend others is to generate self-hatred and rejection of those who similarly offend. To extinguish all evidence of difference, the self-hater seeks a spurious sense of superiority - vanquishing the other and identifying with the one who vanquishes. Kushner rejects the rejection: “In being Jewish one is born into a history of oppression and persecution, and a history that offered, at various points, a sort of false possibility of a kind of an assimilation that demanded as one of its prerequisites that you abandon your identity as a Jew...If you’re hated by a social order, don’t try and make friends with it. Identify yourself as other, and identify your *determining characteristics* as those characteristics which make you other and unliked and despised,” Kushner says.<sup>32</sup> The individual gains self-awareness and the grace of self-acceptance; the political subject gains access to a community that can assert its rights and demand its due.

Kushner’s core premise in defining his political identity is that society’s stigma carries with it an inherent good, which is the potential acceptance of difference. Political and cultural pluralism and the competing angles of vision they engender are, in Kushner’s view, requisites for civil democracy. In the Prologue to his short play *Slavs!*, a discussion between two ancient Russian babushkas illustrates the problem of exclusion of debate from the political arena. As they sweep snow off the steps of the Kremlin, they dispute in astonishing acuity, the use of violence in the name of revolution. Babushka One proposes a “direct connection from...the embrace of violence...to dictatorship plain and simple.” Babushka Two responds, “Marx’s defense of revolutionary violence must be set

it its proper context,” and continues with a breath-taking explication of that context. The exchange, however, is totally silenced by the approach of the Politburo Members, for whom the Babushkas are almost invisible.<sup>33</sup> The politicians cannot and will not hear debate among the citizenry. Kushner’s point is that coercive homogeneity diminishes discourse, suppresses debate, and ossifies the system of enforcement. No matter the ideals at its root, the system that excludes difference will wither away.

Kushner emphasizes that excluded groups are often blind to their commonalities and the possibilities of alliance. The categorical ambiguities of Jewishness also remain: “I don’t know what to call us at this point. I mean we’re not a religion, it makes everyone uneasy to think of us as a race, including Jews...we’ve wound up being the oddest phenomena in modern history.”<sup>34</sup>

### **SEEDS OF DIFFERENCE: HISTORY AND MEMORY**

History matters in Kushner’s work. “Over and over, [Kushner’s] characters ask fundamental questions about their relation to the past.”<sup>35</sup> Gerda Lerner says of history, “It is memory formed and shaped so as to have meaning.”<sup>36</sup> Quoting Carl Becker, she tell us that history is “an imaginative reconstruction of vanished events”<sup>37</sup> But history is also our teacher; to become agents of history and not its victims, we must accept its gifts.

*Millennium Approaches* opens in a cemetery, with the Jewish ritual of mourning, and a recitation of names that in themselves are expressive of a Jewish world lost to assimilation. A rabbi eulogizes Louis’ grandmother Sarah Ironson. The Rabbi did not know Sarah, but his memorial to her tells the story of a generation:

*She was...a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania – and how we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up here, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America, you and your children and their children with the goyische names. You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, your air the air of the steppes – because she carried the old world on her back across the ocean, in a boat, and she put it down and Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush, and she*

*worked that earth into your bones, and you pass it to your children, this ancient, ancient culture and home.*<sup>38</sup>

The clay of the *shtetl* is worked into the bones of the generations and will not be forgotten. The spiritual violence of the journey is easier to forget, to repress; but it too must be remembered, and honored. *In you that journey is.* The rabbi admonishes the mourners, and he warns them: “pretty soon...all the old will be dead.”<sup>39</sup>

Grandma Ironson is dead, as is the world that nurtured her. This distinct, unique and irreplaceable community “exist[s] only as nostalgic memory, as an imagined past.”<sup>40</sup> We lose who we are, the granules of history, ingested, effaced, corroded and disfigured by an assimilating culture, still retain some vigor. Louis’s “grandmother’s generation remains imbedded in his cells; his angle of being is, on some fundamental level, tempered by the history of Jewish immigrants in America.”<sup>41</sup> In the cemetery, we bury the past, and with it, a history of struggle and a salutary belief in communal obligation. Louis has not seen Grandma Sarah in years but her funeral leaves him with the sense of a persistent lack of history and community in his life. He is unmoored, his connection to the past has virtually dissolved and his major choice in the play – to abandon a lover dying of AIDS – reflects a moral failure that is in some part at least attributable to his own alienation. The old rabbi is also adrift: he responds to Louis’s need for answers by ducking the question. “If you want to confess, see a priest,” the rabbi says; he has a long drive to get home to the Bronx.<sup>42</sup>

The text poses questions about what was extinguished when waves of immigrants washed up on American shores. In Kushner’s one-act *Undoing World* he examines “the impact of the ideas of existence, society and politics brought from Eastern Europe to America, and the ways in which those ideas permanently burnished the American intellectual and moral landscape.”<sup>43</sup> In *A Bright Room Called Day*, Kushner invokes history from another angle: here, he considers the loss of a culture, a people and a faith, and the lamentable response to radical evil. Two eras occupy parallel space, and the juxtaposition offers insight into the structures of fascism. Weimar Germany and Reagan’s America are layered against—and comment on—each other; the public spectacle of a

political landscape is invoked through the quotidian lives of ordinary, though angry, paralyzed, disempowered citizens. For Kushner, history shapes thought, thought shapes history.

Gerda Lerner writes: "...every Jew is born into a historical world, and a consciousness of being linked to other members of the Jewish community. How to define that collectivity becomes a crucial and disturbing question."<sup>44</sup> Kushner's relationship to that collectivity is a question that he both rehearses and suppresses. But his work is clearly inflected by his Jewish background: "Somehow osmotically this culture has seeped into my bones," he says.<sup>45</sup> Kushner mines Judaism for its riches, affirming and embracing aspects, yet remains free to slip outside its boundaries at will.

Roof, in a study of gay Jewish life, argues that we are "meaning-making creatures who selectively choose interpretations to authenticate our own convictions."<sup>46</sup> Schnoor adds: "Due to the emphasis on traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, procreation and conservative religious values many gay and lesbian Jews feel a sense of alienation from the Jewish community and develop an ambivalent or conflicted relationship about their own Jewish identity."<sup>47</sup> These writers suggest that gay Jews, in negotiating these intersecting identities, are embracing a hermeneutics of difference that authenticates their experience as Jews.

Political identity is another area to be negotiated *within* the tradition: "We do not feel our ignorance (of Jewish heritage) as a deficit," says Irena Klepfisz in *Dreams Of An Insomniac*, in which she discusses her desire to reconcile progressive and mainstream strands of the Jewish community.<sup>48</sup> Klepfisz is a feminist, a lesbian, a Yiddishist, and a Jewish progressive. Often, she finds that the left-leaning Jewish community undervalues or ignores the Jewish aspect of its identity. She "feel[s] alienated from Jewish progressives who do not share my cultural concerns, who do not worry about Jewish cultural survival... I am often pained by the ignorance of many Jewish progressives in relation to Jewish history, culture, and religion and wish we would have more contact with the mainstream community and get our Jewishness on firmer ground."<sup>49</sup> In her

mind, the separation between progressives and the Jewish mainstream signals deep intolerance of Jews for Jews.<sup>50</sup> But, both communities could be reanimated by mutually sustaining ideals, a utopian possibility that echoes the longing for repair that Kushner hints at as well.

In Act Three of *Millennium Approaches*, Louis, having abandoned his dying lover Prior, is “speechifying,” (the term signals hypocrisy and a suspect morality, and undercuts what he says) about radical democracy and human rights other political potentialities. A flawed, compromised, figure, Louis is a vehicle for Kushner’s self-effacing irony. The counterpoint of skepticism and assertion allows Kushner to avow and disavow a singular position, spoken as it is by a liberal, educated, successful white man (read: complicit) in America, and therefore necessarily suspect. (“You cry, but you endanger nothing in yourself,” Prior tells Louis.<sup>51</sup> This is Kushner’s definition of a liberal.) Louis rambles and backtracks and apologizes for his “sort of Jewishness” (“I’m not all that Jewish-looking or...you know in New York everyone is...”).<sup>52</sup> But what Louis says about the limits of tolerance is crucial to an understanding of the politics of the margin; “It’s not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred.” The essential point, the inescapable point of cultural politics, is that “*Power* is the object, not being tolerated.” Precisely. “Fuck assimilation,” he says.<sup>53</sup>

Louis could be channeling Roy Cohn; for Cohn, power is the *only* object. A real-life power broker, the semi-fictional Cohn is drawn brilliantly in *Angels*. Kushner embroiders an already-oversize character to create the portrait of an audacious, bitter man. Cohn, closeted and a Jew, was Joe McCarthy’s cat’s paw; he was also utterly obsessed with power. And a man with power is not, cannot be, gay. Cohn insists he is not homosexual, not because he does not sleep with men; he does. But, as he tells the doctor who diagnoses him with AIDS: “Labels tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order?...Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have

zero clout.”<sup>54</sup> Cohn makes it clear who he is: “a heterosexual man...who fucks around with guys.”<sup>55</sup>

The Jewish male is frequently feminized in the cult and myth of their oppressors; in Europe, Jewish men were said to menstruate; in Yemen, Jewish men by law had to ride donkeys side-saddle, like women; there are endless examples of equivalent indignities.<sup>56</sup> The Jewish male was a man without power. Roy Cohn’s persona is fully antithetical to the feminized man. He refuses the passive (Jewish) role of a virtuous outsider; he rejects “the sanctity of the insulted and injured,” he embraces power with no apology. Roy Cohn, in *Angels*, stands astride the world, but ultimately he too is powerless against catastrophe, in his case, AIDS. For men like Roy Cohn, erasing the mark of deviance is paramount. Stigma scars the psyche, deforms the character of individual and community. As Lerner reminds us, “Victims internalize the guilt for their victimization; they become contemptible [in their own eyes] for being available to victimization.”<sup>57</sup> Cohn was, by his own standards, *not-gay* and *not-a-Jew*, but an American. Americans were victors; an *American* was not – could not be – either powerless or an object of contempt.

## UNRULY DIFFERENCE AND SACRED COMEDY

Elmer Lefkowitz, a lawyer representing the people of NY in these Difficult Days, and Mrs. Lefkowitz, his mother. Elmer reads a letter:

SUBJECT: A PRAYER FOR THE CITY FROM THE PEOPLE OF NEW YORK  
To: God AKA Allah, Vishnu, Jehovah, Jah, Dao, Buddha, the Lord, Our Father Who Art in Heaven, Avenu Malkenu, Blessed Mother Gaia, Ops, The Big Sky, Mystic Sea Turtle, Zeus, Jupiter, Unmoved Mover, First Principle, Alpha, Omega, etc., etc., etc., and all other aliases, licenses, franchises, appurtenances, legal instruments, devices, monikers, and accouterments pertaining thereunto in perpetuity throughout the Universe.

MRS. LEFKOWITZ

This is how you talk to God? This is how you pray?

ELMER

In America, at least in New York, atheists may talk to god.<sup>58</sup>

Atheists may talk to God, but like many others, believers and non-believers alike, they are shuffling up new visions of just Whom they might be speaking to. “Widespread disenchantment exists both with traditional notions about God and also with the doctrinal systems to which these ideas belong,” asserts Lionel Corbett in *The Religious Function of*

*the Psyche*.<sup>59</sup> Corbett touches a chord: there is a hunger for unmediated spirituality, a direct relationship to the divine. His ideas are non-denominational, but they gird a new religious individualism, which in turn informs the invigorated Jewish search for meaning we discuss here. Beyond the political and cultural ramifications of “unruly difference,” Kushner and his contemporaries wrestle with questions of faith, transcendence and redemption in the mytho-poetic cosmology of Judaism. It is this aspect of difference that we explore here.

Kushner, with a deep bow to Walter Benjamin, imagines the return of both memory and angels in *Angels in America*. The play’s prophets and angels are not gratuitous devices used for theatrical effect; they penetrate the central arc of the play and intervene in the play of multiple meanings at work in the text. But what do the angels and prophets come to say? “My wrath is as fearsome as my countenance is splendid,” the Angel pronounces.<sup>60</sup> Prior’s wise-cracking responses guarantee that the scene is as hilarious as it is terrifying. Still, the Angel has a majestic mission: to “revise the Text,” invert the Law, proclaim the Truth that “not Physics but Ecstasies Makes the Engine Run.” Prior and the Angel “get very turned on” as the Angel recites Scripture. “I am The Book” she (it?) says, and Prior gets a hard-on. The Will of Heaven is to release “The Universe Aflame with Angelic Ejaculate.”<sup>61</sup> Joy and sexual exuberance are the glorious rejoinders to a world filled with suffering. The proposition is dramatic, the situation is urgent: The Angel visits Prior (the about to be anointed “prophet”) because, tired of His unimaginative angel bureaucracy, God *left*, and He did not return.

Using language that is self-consciously Biblical, *Millennium’s* Act Two: The Epistle gives us Prior, by now convinced he is a prophet and dressing the part. The Angel’s embroidered verse is punctuated by Prior’s terse and skeptical counterpoint; the content of the Angel’s text however, is serious explication. “The Aleph Glyph from which all Words Descend, The King of the Universe: HE Left.”<sup>62</sup> The Angels are bewildered, their cosmic Father-Lover has abandoned them, “to Nasty Chastity.”<sup>63</sup> To catastrophe. The Angel’s message is: *stop moving!* Do not MINGLE, she implores. She wants STASIS.<sup>64</sup> This is an absurdity, an assault on life, an injunction that ends with a

mindless aphorism; it is certainly no answer. Prior, the reluctant Prophet, is going blind; still, he sees clearly enough to label the Angel's vision of life "preposterous."

There is a full cosmology here: After the Angel (she of the *eight* vaginas) and Prior reach orgasm, the exhausted Angel proclaims, joyfully: "The Body is the Garden of the Soul." God is "Deus Erectus," a "male flaming Hebrew letter." Angels are "made for His pleasure,...[they] can only ADORE."<sup>65</sup> Sexual pleasure is at the center of this God's creation. God, however, got bored. He wanted something new: "Sleeping Creation's *Potential for Change*." (emphasis added). This is what humans, unigenitaled, split in two, bring: "In YOU the Virus of TIME began!" Here begins the catastrophe: "when time began, the Garden Buckled."<sup>66</sup> Existence plunges into time, and the dogs of history are set free; things come apart, the center does not hold. The wound is at the very heart of human existence, because when God incarnates into life, He moves. Motility is the very definition of life. The Angel's vision of fixity is unacceptable; fixity is death.

This is the God of imagination, fecundity, sex and pleasure. But He is also the Hebrew God, God of the Word, the Aleph who gave birth to time. "In making us God apparently set in motion a potential in the design for change, for random event, for movement forward," Prior tells us.<sup>67</sup> Humans think, imagine and act; through their capacities they transform time into history.

What does Kushner glean from Judaism in his approach to history? Clearly, he finds points of reference in particular events of Jewish history (the journey of immigrants from the "old country," [referenced in *Angels*]; the Holocaust [backdrop for *Bright Room Called Day*], the tense realities of black-Jewish relations [*Caroline, or Change*]). But Kushner also searches history in recognizably Jewish ways. In the territory between God's promise and His silence, Kushner pursues his questions.

In *Angels*, history "cracks wide open" (as Ethel Rosenberg predicts) when the Angel appears.<sup>68</sup> This Angel is no *deus ex machina*, but rather a gadfly sent to awaken



Prior to prophecy. History is made meaningful by the coming of the Angel who ratifies the new Prophet, who in turn will bring redemption, or so we hope. With Prior as Prophet (the Angel addresses him as such, and he refers to himself as Jonah, another reluctant prophet) and the coming of the millennium, will God return to history?

And if He does return, will He bring utopia or apocalypse? So far, it's an even bet. In *Perestroika*, Joe and Louis engage in philosophical debate, wedged between rounds of pleasurable sex. Louis, a self-proclaimed atheist, ironically maintains a stereotypically Jewish stance: "I have no right not to suffer, if I failed to suffer the universe would become unbalanced." Joe, a Mormon conservative, finds this to be a self-abusing and deluded position in a world which, he asserts, is essentially *unperfectable*. What Joe refutes as part of *his* epistemology is the "nineteenth-century socialist romanticist conflation of government and society, law and Justice, idea and action, irreconcilables which only meet at some remote horizon." <sup>69</sup>

What is telling here is not simply that Louis is wrong to suffer—Joe's admonition, to "...accept as rightfully yours the happiness that comes your way,"<sup>70</sup> is the obvious and necessary rejoinder to Louis' existential masochism—but that the Enlightenment project of rationality is an illusion. Mistrust of the rational is a mainstay of the inner scaffolding of Kushner's texts. Joe *does* believe in God, which for him means there is a hole that rationality cannot fill. Joe, in coming out, liberates himself and so begins to articulate a healthier vision of life. He encourages Louis, "Forget your victimology."<sup>71</sup> Rather, Joe wants to embrace freedom, which is beyond ideology (neither "right" nor "left" politically), and which is, Kushner implies, the ground on which a life worth living must be built.

The most evident refutation of the rational is the seriousness with which Kushner imbues the divine, even within the structure of comedy. The more usual take on questions of faith in modern writing is tongue-firmly-in-cheek. But, in the opening notes to *Perestroika*, Kushner makes it clear that while God may be funny (S)He is not laughable. "The angel is immensely august, serious and dangerously powerful always,"

“and Prior is running for his life, sick, scared and alone.”<sup>72</sup> The divine comedy becomes terrifying when one’s life is at stake.

Divine Law may be faltering in this picture, but it is not spent; it still maintains its severity and some of its power. Kushner is dubious about orthodoxy in any of its guises. The Oldest Living Bolshevik, clearly past his prime, proclaims a love of Theory (another word for the Law), and the inability to act in its absence: “Show me the words that will reorder the world, or else keep silent.”<sup>73</sup> The Bolshevik is a political figure, but the reference to Authority, to Someone who will bring Utopia, cuts across politics and prayer. For him, Theory is Ideology is Scripture: God’s Word, which ordered the world, cannot re-order it, and God is silent, missing or long dead. Yet, the search for Theory goes on; at its center is a yearning for redemption. A world without Theory, without a grand utopian design, is denuded of majesty and purpose. “You who live in this Sour Little Age cannot imagine the grandeur of the prospect we gazed upon.”<sup>74</sup>

In a world absent of memory and wonder, Kushner is influenced by both; his plays are suffused with apocalyptic images and utopian longings. Walter Benjamin, the German Jewish literary critic who theorized history through somewhat obfuscating veils of Marxism and Jewish Messianic utopianism, is a central influence on *Angels in America*. “The play’s conceptualizations of the past, of catastrophe, and of utopia are clearly inflected by Benjamin’s *Theses*,” according to David Savran, who goes on to say that Kushner’s Angel is Benjamin’s Angel of History in drag.<sup>75</sup> History is understood as the necessary precondition of Messianic redemption, though the two are ultimately antithetical. “Messianism demands a complete repudiation of the world as it is, placing its hope in a future which can only be brought about by the complete destruction of the old order.”<sup>76</sup> Messianism is at once a vision of utopia and of apocalypse. There are hints of both in Kushner’s *Angels*.

#### **MARTIN SHERMAN’s *Messiah*: PREFIGURING UTOPIA OR APOCALYPSE?**

Martin Sherman is an American-born, London-based playwright best known for *Bent*, a landmark play about Nazi persecution of homosexuals that was produced on

Broadway in 1979. Like Kushner, he is Jewish and gay. When he wrote *Bent*, he felt it was important to assert himself as gay-identified; by 2000, when he returned to Broadway with *Rose*, a one-woman show starring Olympia Dukakis, he felt society had reached a point where he could address any subject. *Rose* pays tribute to Sherman's Ukrainian grandparents, who lived next door as he grew up in Philadelphia, but with whom he could not communicate: they did not speak English and he was not allowed to learn Yiddish. "In *Rose* it's the Jewish part of me...that is obvious."<sup>77</sup>

Sherman's 1984 play *Messiah* is a bitter comedy about spiritual longing and the catastrophes of faith. An obscure Jew named Sabbatai Zevi presented himself as the Messiah. His campaign, the mass exuberance that accompanied it, followed by his sudden conversion to Islam, reverberated among Europe's Jews for decades and more. Sherman's play looks at the rumors of redemption that accompany Sabbatai Zevi and how they touch the life and faith of a small family in Poland.<sup>78</sup> Sherman himself provides historical context in an Afterpiece to the play: "Over one third of the once thriving and independent Jewish community had been slaughtered and the rest impoverished. During this time the people became obsessed with visions of salvation, and Kabbalah, the mystic interpretation of the scriptures, became a primary force. There was an all-consuming certainty that the Messiah would finally arrive."<sup>79</sup>

The play begins when rumors of the Messiah's incarnation circulate in the small Polish town of Yultishk. The Jews of Yultishk are feverish with dreams of salvation; their rescue imminent, they succumb to religious hysteria, eager to strip away everything they have. The cosmic order is about to change.

Rachel, the main character in *Messiah*, is a young woman with a "difficult" face, an unacceptably ugly face, disfigured by misery. As a child, Rachel watched as the Cossacks sewed a live cat into her father's belly, watched as her town burned. Her mother Rebecca tells us that the child forgot, but her face remembered. Rebecca was made mute by her ordeal, but she prays in secret to the only God in whom she can believe: Satan, the devil.

The town is swept away with the need to believe the Messiah has truly arrived. Reb Ellis, a genial (if old and unappealing) fruit seller who marries Rachel, is a pragmatist; but even he overcomes his doubts, sells all his possessions, and is prepared “to fly” to Jerusalem. He yearns, he believes, and he leaps: with Rachel’s hapless encouragement, Reb Ellis jumps off the roof of his house and dies. Yet his act only stokes the fires of ecstasy in town, and, perversely, it is the sign that Rachel needs to assuage her doubts.

By far the most ardent believer, however, is Reb Ellis’s young nephew Asher. A fervent student of Kabbalah, Asher believes not in spite of but *because* he lost his parents in the pogrom. “My parents were murdered by the Cossacks. I’ve always known the Messiah would come. For the sake of my parents.”<sup>80</sup> “Our people massacred... What for? What for? To prepare for the Messiah!”<sup>81</sup> With the coming of Sabbatai Zevi, the promise is fulfilled, and Asher is out of his senses with joy.

Rachel wants to believe that suffering is past and the Messiah has come, but she needs proof, something for all to see. No sign comes. When she follows Asher to search for Sabbatai Zevi, she is drawn on by her sexual desire for the boy. Rachel’s most pressing needs are more carnal than spiritual; she has a healthy lust, and a suspicion of anything other than mundane, bodily needs. If “the Messiah came today and he had warts and a big belly I would send him back,” she says.<sup>82</sup> She lives in her body. Asher denies the body; he beats himself with nettles to subdue desire. When Asher faints, Rachel understands: he forgot to eat.

Rachel is pragmatic, a realist; in contemporary parlance, she is “grounded.” As she is also the only character in the play with a personal relationship with God, Sherman seems to be making an oblique comment on the utility and value of faith: God is required to function within the ordinary, if He is to have meaning for ordinary people. Rachel talks to God constantly, but He will not talk to her, and she berates Him for it. Her wise-cracking, plaintive diatribes are a cross between Tevye the Milkman and Job. “Dear

God, why do you play jokes on me?” She is exasperated and she wants to end the relationship: “If you know everything already – then what’s the point of talking to you?”<sup>83</sup> She complains, but she cannot give up completely. Finally, she decides that God is just quiet. Like Rebecca, He has been made mute by suffering.

Sherman plays his changes on the Book of Job; Rachel too believes that suffering is punishment for sin and seeks to merit remediation through purity and faith. But in Sherman’s play, the Biblical formulation is absurd: the only sin has been perpetrated *on* Rachel and her people; God alone has transgressed. Rachel and her family have undergone excruciating tests for no discernable reason, pushing faith to its limit. She screams and begs, blames and argues, in endless disputation with God, she demands an accounting. She accosts God with complaint, she debates the merits of His acts and in so doing, Sherman seems to imply, she most affirms herself as a Jew.

Yet Rachel receives no sign from God. Still she aspires to live a Jewish life, according to His will (as interpreted by men, she notes), She asks the same of God; she wants to call Him to account, to make him live by His own laws, which He does not deign to do. In the face of history, and God’s seeming absence, holding on to faith is tortuous. But that leads to another question: What does it mean to be a Jew if Torah is implausible and history is unbearable?

In *Messiah*, the shadow twin of the absent god is the absent hero, the uncertain savior who never appears in the play that bears his name. Sabbatai Zevi cannot prove that he is the Messiah, because he is *also* waiting for a sign. At the play’s end, Asher relates the end of Sabbatai’s sojourn: the Sultan threatened to tie flaming torches to Sabbatai until he burned to death. “Of course, if you are the messiah,” the Sultan says, “a miracle will happen. And you will not burn.” Prove you are the Messiah, the Sultan insists. “How can I? Every day I wait for a sign from God to prove it to *me*.”<sup>84</sup>

The most spiritually awake character in the play is Sabbatai’s wife Sarah, a Jewess whose family was killed by the Cossacks and who was forced to convert to

Catholicism. She later fled the convent and began her search for the Messiah, whom she planned to marry. Sabbatai is a plain man who gets depressed and gets stomach aches, but she chooses him because as she sees it, “He’s the only Messiah we have.”<sup>85</sup> Sabbatai Zevi addresses a people ready to hear: as W.D.Davies frames it, “. . .among Jewish hearts made sick by hope deferred, the magic word, Messiah was enough to set the world on fire.”<sup>86</sup> The world Sherman depicts is on fire: with utopian possibility, with hope.

Like Sarah, Rachel wants an ordinary messiah, one whom she can understand. She rejects abstruse laws and chafes at a severe and distant God who denies the claims of the body and punishes desire. We have seen this before, in Kushner: unruly bodies exceed the strictures of Abstract Law. In Part One of *Angels*, Louis Ironson says “Justice. . .is an immensity, a confusing vastness. Justice is God.”<sup>87</sup> It is this version of the Hebrew God that Louis believes would “clobber him by now,” *if* He were real. Like Rachel, Louis talks to a God he does not believe in. He too struggles to free himself from guilt and punitive notions about the sinfulness of desire. So it is in Sherman’s play, which presents Sabbatai’s antinomianism, his implied radical critique of moral stricture and what was later interpreted as his rejection of normative Jewish observance. However, although Sherman objects to what he sees as a restrictive morality, he also remonstrates against what he perceives as the vacuity of Sabbatai’s message.

In Sherman’s play, the Law is already suspect; at best, we follow the laws simply to appease an unreasonable God. When Reb Ellis talks about the finer points of blessing orange rinds and lemon rinds and how these blessings might differ, Sherman’s point is the pointlessness, in his view, of strict ritual observance. To a non-believer, spiritual practice seems absurd; in the face of misery, why care about citrus rinds? Hence, the antinomian message, which Sherman places in the mouth of Sabbatai: “Nothing is forbidden. The Messiah is here. Once there’s redemption, then everything is without sin. . .We’re free. This is no more spiritual oppression.”<sup>88</sup> Asher spreads the good news: “Blessed are thou, oh Order, our God, who has permitted the forbidden.”<sup>89</sup> Doughty Reb Ellis believes that he can “climb the sky. The Bible says, when the Messiah comes, man will soar up to the clouds. . . I can soar.”<sup>90</sup>

But Reb Ellis does not soar. He jumps off his roof and crashes to his death. Sabbatai Zevi ignominiously becomes an apostate; Asher commits physical suicide. And Rachel is left with her fury toward a God she cannot believe in and cannot leave behind. Her ambivalence is a raw and painful truth. She lives in God's funhouse, He of the perverse sense of humor. *Messiah* extols the Messiah as a vehicle of unruly difference, i.e. of spiritual resistance and cultural critique.

The Messiah that Sherman portrays brings dispensation from the old order, freeing us from a repressive and punitive religion of rebuke; he offers instead a message of affirmation and joy. Interestingly, it is Sarah who delivers the message; Sabbatai is a distant figure, barely glimpsed, but Sarah is present. She, unlike her husband, is truly moved by compassion for the Jewish people, and she does real good. She brings relief: song, pleasure and permission. She encourages Rachel to seduce Asher, bringing them both true delight; in Sarah's presence, Rebecca speaks her heart, after twenty years of silence. Sarah herself marries the sexual and the sacred, and through her the Messiah brings release from sinfulness. The same motif is found in *Angels*: Prior's direct, unmediated experience of the divine is sexual, the Angel's touch brings them both to orgasm.

But what Sabbatai Zevi really says is: do what you will, which is the direct opposite of obeying God's detailed and explicitly repressive commands. This false Messiah is an apt subject for a contemporary writer like Sherman, who explores the contours of his doubt yet attempts to define a personally meaningful spirituality within an intact Jewish identity. Sherman's central characters seem to express his own polarity: Rachel seeks permission; Asher hopes to experience the divine; both wrestle with faith and doubt. They reflect a modern search for a meaningful Judaism and a spiritual identity in which the relationship with the divine is central. But uncertainty is the only absolute ground on which we tread. After the collapse of everything she hoped for, after Sabbatai's apostasy and Asher's suicide, Rachel still screams to God: "You who aren't. You who don't...[exist]. There is no you."<sup>91</sup> But she cannot stop talking to Him.

## DEB MARGOLIN: HOLY DIFFERENCE

Deb Margolin is a performance artist, a playwright, “an in-your-face performer.”<sup>92</sup> She is also unabashedly a Jew. “I was never ashamed of being a Jew, never,” she says; “I love being Jewish. To me it seemed like a status symbol, a symptom [!] of greatness.”<sup>93</sup> Not everything about being Jewish is golden; in her dreary Hebrew school, for example, everyone was “clinically depressed,” they watched scratchy old films about the Holocaust in which “everything sounded like Kaddish.”<sup>94</sup> Being Jewish is “a series of exquisite burdens.”<sup>95</sup> Prism-like, her glistening prose reflects the facets, turning this way and that.

Margolin shares these thoughts, intimately and generously, in *O Wholly Nights and Other Jewish Solecisms*, an eloquent, elegant one-woman performance piece.<sup>96</sup> There is an evanescent euphoria in the room when Margolin performs, a quality which theater scholar Jill Dolan sees as a kind of brush with utopia. Dolan’s idea of utopian performance is rooted in bodily presence and “how utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide.” It reaches beyond aliveness, that indispensable condition of theater, to point toward something that could “hint at how a different world could feel.”<sup>97</sup>

There are parallels between Paul Gilroy’s politics of transfiguration and Dolan’s utopic performance; both suggest political readings with rich cultural and possibly spiritual overtones. Theater offers the possibility of an embodied, participatory, non-hierarchical expression of communal longing, a space to recreate the imaginary which echoes the yearning for an unmediated experience of the divine. Utopia, the science of nowhere, is prescriptive, even coercive; it proposes a vision of postponed uniformity, a sort of hegemony of perfection. But a utopic moment *might* offer a fleeting intimation of transformation and renewal. Artists, like prophets and statesmen, might hope for oracles, for manifestations of the divine.



The self-defining, non-conforming individuality of embodied performance is key to identifying *difference* as its central modality, the operational core that links art, politics and spirit. The performance is *unique* in time and space, and therein lies the performer's essential resistance to authority. In Dolan's introduction to *Utopia in Performance*, she quotes Richard Bauman's homage to performers, who, he says, are: "admired for ...enhancement of experience they provide, feared because of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo." There is, pointedly, a "persistent association between performers and marginality or deviance" which is the ground for a resistance that is not doctrinaire or ideological, but disruptive, anarchic, and regenerative.<sup>98</sup> The charisma of performance may offer a pale, momentary glimpse of an ever-vanishing utopia.

For Dolan, Deb Margolin is among those performers who evoke, through affective experience, a utopic possibility. "In some ways," Dolan says, feminist performance has always been utopian, trying as it does to create new meanings for gender, race, and sexuality thru performance."<sup>99</sup> Dolan acknowledges that the quality she seeks to describe is ineffable and unquantifiable, and it varies from viewer to viewer. Nonetheless, Margolin, whose incandescent performance of *Oh Wholly Nights* is a joyous, thoughtful meditation on themes of identity, experience, hope and redemption, offers a taste of Dolan's utopic possibility in her radical vision/revisioning of Jewish difference and possibility.

By contrast to Kushner, who is nourished by contemporary cultural Judaism, and to Sherman, who evokes doubt and excavates failures of the past, Margolin is celebratory, trading on immediacy but facing out toward an unknowable future. She completes our small circle of Jewish historical time exhibited in theatrical guise: "I love being Jewish because I love the fact that the main Jewish idea is that the Messiah hasn't yet come. We sit outside and we have a cigarette and we wait for him. Who knows who he is. Maybe it was Martin Luther King. Maybe it was Jesus. Maybe it's John Tewilliger who's going to be coming around next week with a suitcase full of hair tonic. I don't know. And I love the openendedness of that."<sup>100</sup>

*O Wholly Nights* is a quirky, hilarious and oddly tender piece about things we hand down and the future we hope for. However, it begins with a garment and a memory. On a bare stage we see a greenish and gossamer dress, “hand-embroidered by ancient, loving fingers.”<sup>101</sup> This, Margolin tells us, is the “literal and figurative symbol” of what she wants to convey; it has to do with imagination and memory. “It’s old... You can tell I didn’t get this at the Gap.”<sup>102</sup> The silky dress whispers to her. “This incredible garment from another age, it took my breath away.”<sup>103</sup> The woman who gave Margolin the dress told the story of its provenance; her words “melted like snow-flakes on the hot pavement of my awe.”<sup>104</sup> It was found in a destroyed synagogue, once the property of a young, immigrant woman, who fled for her life.

For years Margolin held on to the dress, wanting to “find the right and proper use in my life for this remarkable garment,” and in this piece about Jewish identity, she does. But the dress figures only as prime mover in a series of associations, enrobing memory, witness to the living moment. Like beads on a string, the piece is a series of small gems touching each other, loosely connected through Margolin’s wit, observations, memories, and the generosity and grace of her presence, which she shares with us, in the moment, in the theater.

*O Wholly Nights* is a meditation on waiting, on the “unbearable ache” for a relief that is just beyond sight.<sup>105</sup> Jews wait for the Messiah, whose identity has yet to be revealed. For Margolin that waiting is “...like a big Halloween party, life is a costume party in which anyone may come forward from behind a mask and reveal themselves as Moshiach. And since you never know who or when, it’s best to be as graceful as you can to everyone and try to dress reasonably. The whole clean underwear syndrome.”<sup>106</sup> But the spirit of life is *in* the waiting. Her language is elegiac as she describes the quality of her waiting: “...with my daughter in my arms, falling asleep, losing her wakefulness in my arms the way the sky loses light at dusk, changing colors, announcing its beauty in blue and then pink and then smoke and finally in stars...”<sup>107</sup> Describing the things she notices, minutely, like a pointillist, deliriously joyful but hard-edged and funny, too, the glints of life illumined by the sharpness of her vision. “You wait with children for them

to grow up, you wait with old people for death. Growing up, dying, these are symptoms of the coming of Moshiach.”<sup>108</sup> In the waiting is life, in the coming is relief.

Jill Dolan says the play “is about noticing, witnessing together moments that otherwise might pass into oblivion, moments that might signal...the advent of a utopia when, for Margolin, the Messiah comes.”<sup>109</sup> This Messiah will come “for Margolin” in particular, because a feminist-visions utopia *is* particular. A “universal” utopia would be inescapable, prescriptive and as such, coercive. But the Messiah as Margolin envisions it comes in all sizes, colors, flavors: “for one man it’s Jesus; for another it’s Gold Bond [anti-itch powder]...You just want to interview as many candidates as possible.”<sup>110</sup>

Among the writers we have examined, Margolin most embraces “unruly difference,” developing a resistant discourse as she creates a positive, multi-layered relationship to Judaism. She neither rejects nor offers a critique, instead subsuming Jewishness into a vital, fulsomeness that informs her sense of self, other, world. She reclaims vulnerability as a site of wisdom and power, rather than as its traditional correlate of (Jewish and female) submission. Even in descriptions of the Holocaust films she saw as a child in Hebrew School, there is an alchemical transformation, which Vivian Patraka describes:

“Deb Margolin...portrays the live Jewish body in the present as it grapples with the history of slaughtered Jewish bodies from the past. What has been enacted on her body and psyche – the unmaking, in pain, of Jews – is located and refracted through a performance of making, of creating her body and its relation to the world in the present.”<sup>111</sup>

The body in its aliveness is a locus of experience, a repository of pleasure and pain, the source of desire. Margolin is clear: “Desire is the force of the world, the life force really.”<sup>112</sup> Desire is the antithesis of that stasis, the fixity that Kushner’s bureaucratic Angel hopes to achieve. Desire is the motive of life and the enemy of death. For Margolin, it is a precondition of the joy that promises an effulgent faith. Poetry and pleasure, the miraculous and the magical, these may enrich faith and the life of the spirit.

This is Judaism in a new key, valuing ancient tradition, wrestling with Torah and *mitzvot*, yet alive to transfiguration and possibility.

There are no answers, only questions. The *difference* these writers identify (and identify *with*) at the core of Judaism both transgresses and affirms; it knits together Jewish communal desires, while recognizing that utopia is an elastic, individual, ever-changing possibility. The tangled threads of evolving, historical Jewish identity evoke consternation and exuberance, doubt and faith, challenge and rebuke. In Tony Kushner's adaptation of *The Dybbuk*, the character Azriel, whose faith has been deeply shaken, sends a message to God:

*Though His love become only abrasion, derision, excoriation, tell Him I cling. We cling. He made us, He can never shake us off. We will always find Him out. Promise him that. We will always find Him, no matter how few there are, tell Him we will find Him. To deliver our complaint.*<sup>113</sup>

Judaism, however unorthodoxly defined, has taken its place in the scripts of the American Jewish playwright and on the boards of the American stage. The reticence of an earlier era has been replaced by an assertiveness of the very confident, if often "unruly," American Jew.

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<sup>1</sup> On the early history of Jewish American theatre, see Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: the performance of an American ethnicity, 1860-1920*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), which looks at early Yiddish theatre and Jewish vaudeville. Erdman traces the path of Jewish entertainers who moved out of the cultural periphery gaining entrance into mainstream show business. In particular, see Chapter 6, "The transition toward Jewish invisibility in popular performance." See also, *Vagabond Stars: A world history of Yiddish theatre* by Nahma Sandrow (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996) for its study of Yiddish theater in America. Few comprehensive works on Jewish American theatre in the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century have been written; the most valuable include: *From Hester Street to Hollywood: the Jewish-American stage and screen*, edited by Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983) and *From stereotype to metaphor: the Jew in contemporary drama* by Ellen Schiff (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1982). Of particular relevance to the present essay is Chapter 4, "The Jew as Outsider," in which Schiff makes particular reference to stage representations of Jew as Other. For a broader understanding Jewish American theatre in the American cultural context, see the section on theater (pgs. 115-138) in Stephen J. Whitfield's *In search of American Jewish culture* (Hanover, NH : Brandeis University Press, 1999) and *Jews and American Popular Culture*, ed. Paul Buhle, (Westport Conn. Praeger Publishers, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race And American Identity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 90.

<sup>4</sup> *From Hester Street to Hollywood: Jewish-American Stage and Screen*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen . (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 1,

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 5.

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- <sup>6</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *American Space, Jewish Time: Essays in Modern Culture and Politics* (Armonk, NY: New Castle Books, 1996), 49.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.* 224.
- <sup>8</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers: Essays on Bodies, Histories, and Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 183.
- <sup>9</sup> Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Diaspora," in *Theorizing Diaspora*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 88.
- <sup>10</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 38.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semitism and the Jew*, trans. George J. Becker. 1948 reprint. (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 69.
- <sup>15</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin, 88.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Henry Goldschmidt, *Race & Religion: Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 31. Goldschmidt says race has replaced religion as a principal determinant of social exclusion: "The concept of race as we know it today did not take shape until the late eighteenth century, and only became a dominant form of hierarchy and identity in the mid- to late nineteenth century when it was biologized...It can be no accident that these ideological constructions roughly coincided with the development of nationalism and colonialism." 184. For ethnicity as category, see Anthony Smith, who offers a useful definition of ethnicity: "a named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared memories, and cultural elements; a link with a historic territory or homeland; and a measure of solidarity." Quoted in "Causes and Implications of Ethnic Conflict" by Michael E. Brown, in *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 81-82; also Siniša Malešević, *Sociology of Ethnicity* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2004), 71.
- <sup>18</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin, 99.
- <sup>19</sup> Barry Rubin, *Assimilation and Its Discontents* (New York: Times Books, Random House, 1995), 35.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.* 181.
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- <sup>23</sup> Tony Kushner, *Thinking about the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 47.
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Paul Buhle, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 258.
- <sup>26</sup> Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 119.
- <sup>27</sup> Jonathan Boyarin, *Thinking in Jewish* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 170.
- <sup>28</sup> Robert Vorlicky, ed. *Tony Kushner in Conversation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 155.
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> Quoted in Vorlicky, 217.
- <sup>31</sup> *ibid.* 218.
- <sup>32</sup> *ibid.* 217.
- <sup>33</sup> Tony Kushner, *Slavs!* in *Thinking about the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 99.
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- <sup>35</sup> Framji Minwalla, "Interview with Tony Kushner," in *The Playwright's Muse*, ed. Joan Herrington (New York; London: Routledge, 2002), 130.
- <sup>36</sup> Lerner, 116.

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- <sup>38</sup> Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Part One: Millennium Approaches*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993),10.
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- <sup>40</sup> Framji Minwalla, "When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America*" in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). 106.
- <sup>41</sup> *ibid.* 107.
- <sup>42</sup> Kushner, *Millennium Approaches*, 12.
- <sup>43</sup> James Fisher, *The Theater of Tony Kushner: Living Past Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 171. Fisher refers to an unfinished one-act, "*It's an Undoing World, or Why Should It Be Easy When It Can be Hard?*" In *The New American Theatre (Conjunctions #25)*, ed. John Guare (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Bard College, 1995).
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- <sup>46</sup> Quoted in Randall F. Schnoor, "Being Gay and Jewish: Negotiating Intersecting Identities," *Sociology of Religion* 67 (2006): 45-46.
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- <sup>48</sup> Irena Klepfisz, *Dreams Of An Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes* (Portland, Or.: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990), 184.
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.* 183.
- <sup>50</sup> *ibid.* 184.
- <sup>51</sup> Kushner, *Perestroika*, 85.
- <sup>52</sup> Kushner, *Millennium Approaches*, 90.
- <sup>53</sup> *ibid.*
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- <sup>55</sup> *ibid.* 46.
- <sup>56</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "Masada or Yavneh? Gender and the Arts of Jewish Resistance," in *Jews and Other Differences*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 306-329.
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- <sup>58</sup> Tony Kushner, "A Prayer for New York," *Virginia Quarterly Review* .81 (Fall 2005): 4-11.
- <sup>59</sup> Lionel Corbett, *The Religious Function of the Psyche* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1.
- <sup>60</sup> Kushner, *Perestroika*, 46.
- <sup>61</sup> *ibid.* 47-48.
- <sup>62</sup> *ibid.* 51
- <sup>63</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>64</sup> *ibid.* 52.
- <sup>65</sup> *ibid.* 49.
- <sup>66</sup> *ibid.* 50.
- <sup>67</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>68</sup> *ibid.* 112.
- <sup>69</sup> *ibid.* 34
- <sup>70</sup> *ibid.* 34.
- <sup>71</sup> *ibid.* 38.
- <sup>72</sup> *ibid.* 8
- <sup>73</sup> *ibid.* 14.
- <sup>74</sup> *ibid.* 14.
- <sup>75</sup> David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation," in *Approaching the Millennium*, 17.
- <sup>76</sup> Anson Rabinach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 27-65.
- <sup>77</sup> Gerard Raymond, "Sherman's *Rose* Blooms," *The Advocate* 812 (May 23, 2000).
- <sup>78</sup> See *Jewish History*, Vol. 17, 2003 for a discussion of Shabbatai Zevi.
- <sup>79</sup> Martin Sherman, *Messiah* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1982).

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- <sup>80</sup> Sherman, 20.  
<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, 16.  
<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, 13.  
<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, 16-17.  
<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*  
<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, 45.  
<sup>86</sup> W.D. Davies, "From Schweitzer to Scholem: Reflections on Sabbatai Sevi." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (Dec., 1976) 529-558.  
<sup>87</sup> Kushner, *Millennium Approaches*. 39.  
<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, 39.  
<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, 41.  
<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, 28.  
<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, 57.  
<sup>92</sup> Douglas Langworthy, "Interview with Deb Margolin," *TDR* 46 (Winter 2002)  
<sup>93</sup> Deb Margolin, "O Wholly Nights and Other Jewish Solecisms," in *Of All the Nerve: Deb Margolin, Solo*, ed. Lynda Hart (London; New York: Cassell, 1999), 140.  
<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*  
<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*  
<sup>96</sup> I refer to Margolin's performance of *O Wholly Nights* at Smith College in 2001.  
<sup>97</sup> Dolan, 62.  
<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Dolan, 1.  
<sup>99</sup> Dolan, 46.  
<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Langworthy.  
<sup>101</sup> Margolin, 137.  
<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*  
<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, 138.  
<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, 139.  
<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, 151.  
<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, 143,  
<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, 144.  
<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, 147.  
<sup>109</sup> Dolan, 56.  
<sup>110</sup> Margolin, 150.  
<sup>111</sup> Vivian M. Patraka, *Spectacular Suffering: theatre, fascism and the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 103.  
<sup>112</sup> Margolin, 152.  
<sup>113</sup> *A Dybbuk*, adapted by Tony Kushner, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, from the original by S. Ansky (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 106.