

Jews Were Story-Tellers

Restoring the Jewish Narrative Tradition

By **BRUCE GINSBURG**

Though degrees of emphasis may vary among Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbinical schools, there is a widespread, unstated pecking order in the curriculum for the modern rabbinate.

PERSPECTIVE

Pride of place goes to Talmudic studies, followed in descending order by legal codes, responsa, midrash, Biblical commentary, history, philosophy, and liturgy. Modern Jewish narrative literature — if it appears at all among

broad sections of the Latter Prophets, nearly half the Writings and much of the Apocrypha are narratives rather than legal codes or philosophical treatises. They tell the stories of feeling, thinking, three-dimensional human beings — with their flaws and strengths, failures and triumphs, jealousies and romances — making their personal marks within the context of our national story and God's overarching plan.

I believe the reason narrative literature flourished when Jews were sovereign in their own land

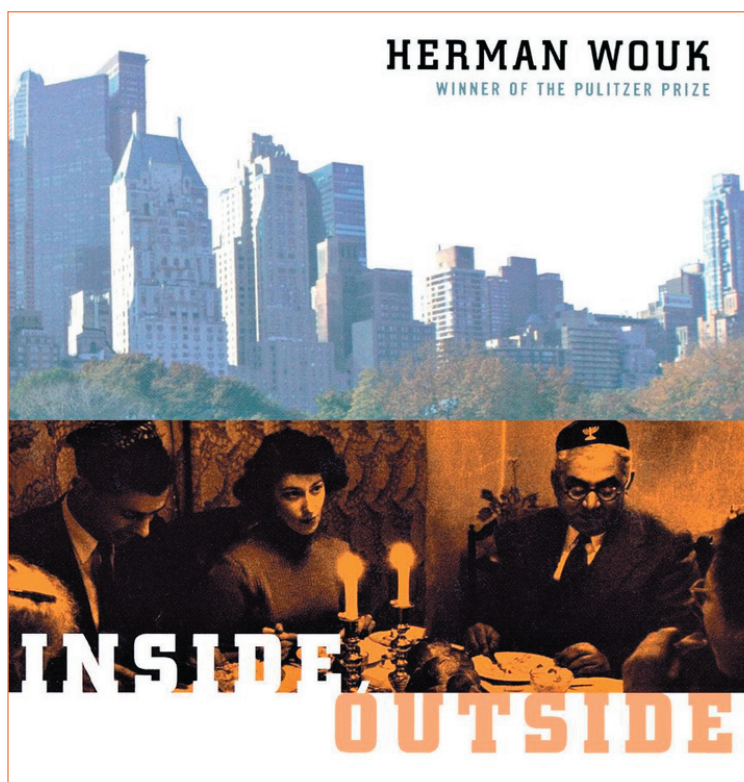
essential ingredients in the mix of sophisticated plot, theme, and character so necessary for good storytelling.

When Jews exercised sovereign-

ty over the ancient Land of Israel, they were capable of writing the Bible. Once they lost it, literary inspiration accompanied them into Exile, but, like the Shekhinah, it

was largely confined to the four cubits of *halakhah*.

Caught in an enduring limbo between a *Paradise Lost* and one *continued on page 28*



Inside, Outside: A novel by Herman Wouk Back Bay Books (reprint), 1995 656p., \$18.99

required courses — ranks dead last. A person can easily receive rabbinic ordination without ever having read Mendele Mokher Sefarim, Y. L. Peretz, Chaim Nachman

and languished when they were in Exile is that a people must be in a position to shape its own story figuratively in order to write it literally. National sovereignty pro-

Isn't that ironic that, over a thousand years, law, poetry, and commentary had a supportive role to narrative?

Bialik, Sholem Aleikhem or S. Y. Agnon.

Isn't that ironic, given the fact that over the Jewish nation's first thousand years, narrative prose dominated its literature, while law, poetry, and commentary (however important) assumed a supportive role? Four of the Five Books of Moses, all the Former Prophets,

vides a culture with a sense of control over its future, a practical stake in the issues, and a burden of responsibility for its actions. It bestows upon it an awareness that human beings are too complex to be easily typed and that competing ideals vie for favor. It grants a people humility and an appreciation of ambiguity. All of these are


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Tellers

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not yet regained, the Jews focused on three things: the glorious past, the unbearable present, and the utopian future. That is why they respectively put their best efforts into recording their collective memory and behavioral code in the legalistic tomes of the Mishneh, Gemara, midrash, and responsa; poured out their souls, lamenting the tragedy of Exile in liturgy and poetry; and longed for messianic redemption in philosophical (especially mystical) writings as well as in lyric verse.

But as Jews slowly evolved

from centuries of subjugation — first to greater autonomy during the Golden Age of Spain, Renaissance Italy and the European Enlightenment, then to the revolutionary freedoms of America and ultimately to full sovereignty in Israel — their remarkable capacity to craft sto-

So while — like many of my colleagues — I conduct a weekly Talmud Shiur, a weekly halakhah lesson, a monthly class on Biblical commentaries, and a spring series on Jewish history, I have made it my business over the last forty years to focus on modern Jewish short story writers, novel-

It is no accident the greatest masters of Jewish narrative emerged recently. Rabbis should not ignore this miracle.

ries returned. It is no accident that the greatest masters of Jewish narrative literature since Biblical times have emerged over the last century and a half. Rabbis should not be blind to this miracle.

ists, and memoirists each fall.

In addition to the luminaries I mentioned earlier, I have had the privilege to devote courses to the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Chaim Hazaz,

Cynthia Ozick, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, Amos Oz, Rabbi Joseph Polak, Primo Levi, Rabbi Haim Sabato, and Aharon Appelfeld, among dozens of others. A full third of those attending these sessions are not my congregants, but a diverse group of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and unaffiliated Jews thirsting for the authentic Jewish insight and inspiration these writers offer.

Currently, I am conducting a series on Herman Wouk's novel *Inside, Outside* — the story of four generations of Jews migrating from Russia to America to Israel. Wouk — who passed away earlier this year just ten days shy of his 104th birthday — was one of America's leading authors over a span of seventy years. Recipient of the Pulitzer

Prize and the Library of Congress' first Lifetime Achievement Award for the Writing of Fiction, he described *Inside, Outside* as the one novel — among all his spectacular books — “closest to my heart.”

The series, which is offered free of charge and is open to the general public, meets Tuesday evenings, November 5 and 12 and December 10 and 17, 8:30 p.m. at Congregation Sons of Israel, 111 Irving Place, Woodmere. I would love for you to join us in this celebration of restoring the Jewish narrative tradition.

Rabbi Bruce Ginsburg is the spiritual leader of Congregation Sons of Israel, Woodmere and a Past President of the Union for Traditional Judaism.

Soldiers

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where military service was the norm. As a result, such youths found themselves “between a rock and a hard place.

most critical of these was women in the military environment.

The IDF, he said, committed itself to creating an environment “in which a *haredi* young man could serve a meaningful combat or support service without having to compromise on his religious way of life.

In addition to these steps, the IDF permitted a civilian organization — Friends of Nahal Haredi — to accompany the soldiers throughout their service. The organization has official IDF recognition and permission to help the soldiers transition from civilian life into the military, ensuring a successful military service. The organization also has a program to help the soldiers transition back into civilian life.

“None of those are trivial,” said Klebanow. “Each one is a challenging transition.” The organization recently appointed one of its graduates — a reserves officer named Yossi Levi — as its CEO, which is an indication of its success.

In addition, the Netzah Yehuda battalion will receive its first home-grown battalion commander in the coming months, a development Klebanow described as historical.

Due to the lack of any family military legacies,

“it's very necessary that there be an organization that really validates to them that their decision to come to the army was the right decision,”

not deal with recruitment — that's a job left to the IDF — as soon as a *haredi* youth makes the decision to enlist, Friends of Nahal Haredi are there, waiting to provide assistance. That includes a staff of around 25 rabbinic mentors, who visit the soldiers on their bases daily, and spend Shabbat and holidays with them.

Beyond the Netzah Yehuda bat-

firestorm that continues to rage over the issue of drafting ultra-Orthodox youths, Klebanow said, “Our opinion, having experience of doing this for 20 years, is that we would not like to see a blanket recruitment of *haredi* youths. I think it's more political. I don't think the army wants to see that. First of all, you can't force people to be soldiers.

“If a *haredi* doesn't find his place in the yeshivas, it could be that he just simply needs something else.”

talion, the IDF has opened *haredi* companies in the Givati and Paratrooper infantry brigades, and is set to do the same in the Golani Brigade. However, those companies are part of regular battalions, unlike Netzah Yehuda.

Another important role played by the organization is accompanying the number of lone *haredi* soldiers, many of whom are alone because their families excommunicated them for enlisting.

While lone soldiers make up around 5 percent of IDF soldiers, in the Netzah Yehuda battalion, the figure stands at 30 percent. “Many of these young men, when they decide they want to go into the

You wouldn't want to serve next to someone who didn't want to be there. What they should be doing is creating more options for *haredi* youths to be able to, if they leave yeshivah, to be able to find venues for them, which contributes something positive and attractive to them.”

Haredi youths have also taken up other key military roles in recent years, including air-force base security and logistical truck driving.

“We have soldiers on many of the bases fixing tanks; there are all sorts of different programs. The army just has to continue to be creative in making attractive openings. You cannot compare the situation of the *haredi* community vis-à-vis their participation, education and work to what the situation was 10 years ago today. There is no comparison,” affirmed Klebanow.

“We have to remember, there is no quick fix,” he emphasized. “This is a program that is dealing with societal change, and it takes time. It's not a five- or 10-year program. It's a program of a few generations.”

Yaakov Lappin writes for JNS.

JNS.org

The organization assists lone *haredi* soldiers because many are alone and excommunicated from their families.

explained Klebanow. “We provide the backing they need to rise when they fall down. Our mission really is making sure these young men have a successful service and a successful life.”

Although the organization does

army, can't go home. So the organization also provides to the best of our abilities. We have apartments for these young men. We don't take any money for them; we just give them homes.”

Asked about the political



Soldiers of the Netzah Yehuda Battalion with hardened faces and under a lightning sky complete the final stages of a 40-kilometer journey through the night on February 16, 2010.

“That was the situation,” he said. “That was not a good situation.”

Then around 21 years ago, a *mashgiach* (kosher supervisor) from a yeshivah in Jerusalem was introduced to a retired brigadier general who was working for the Defense Ministry, and who was in charge of youth programs.

The officer sought to learn about the *haredi* sector, and the two men began cooperating. The eventual fruit of their cooperation was the formation of the Netzah Yehuda battalion.

“The army had to essentially compromise on two major issues,” explained Klebanow. The first and

That translated itself to an environment without any women. That means no women soldiers, commanders or instructors. That's actually easier said than done, because in the army, 95 percent of instructors are women. For them to make that commitment was pretty much a telltale sign that they were really interested in making this happen, and they did.”

The second major obligation was maintaining stringent *kashrut* standards for the battalion. Over time, the IDF placed soldiers in its food base who inspected trucks carrying food to bases that had *haredi* soldiers stationed in them.