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Climbing the Kehilla Walls: Contested Spaces and Conflicted Bodies in Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls*

In *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, Amy Hungerford makes the observation that Jewish faith “is inextricably bound up with ritual and deference to external laws and governing behavior” (2003, 21). She adds that participation in rituals like the Seder or a mar/bat mitzvah¹ is possible without actually believing or considering questions of “ultimate meaning.” Furthermore, Hungerford writes that when Jewish fiction does thematize faith, it is always located in the realm of family and personal health, not in the realm of literary or mystical language, which constitutes the core of her conception of postmodern belief (23). In other words, Hungerford claims that contemporary Jewish narratives are either irreligious or “already religious in a way that does not require them to wrestle down the problem of belief” (24). Unfortunately, her summative Goldilocks-like dismissal of all Jewish American fiction as either ‘too secular’ or ‘too religious’ ignores the nuanced and varied depictions of faith thematized in recent novels by writers such as Nathan Englander, Tova Reich, and Allegra Goodman. In contrast to Hungerford’s description of contemporary Jewish American fiction, Mark Krupnick has observed that “one major trend in Jewish-American writing of the past quarter century has been the retrieval of traditional Jewish forms and topics” (qtd. in Meyer 2004, 110-111). If anything, Krupnick adds, many Jewish authors are tracing a return to the religious from a more secular past and are often wholeheartedly embracing Jewish history and orthodoxy.

Lori Harrison-Kahan praises Goodman’s fiction, in particular *Kaaterskill Falls*, as “heralding a Jewish American literary revival” with Goodman as “the poster child for a still-growing group of post-assimilationist writers who tackle the topics of spirituality and religious observance head on, while finding fertile sources in Yiddish storytelling and Hebrew liturgy” (2012, 187). Professional critics have lauded Goodman for depicting the sometimes fraught negotiation of secular and religious practices via a variety of narrative voices. Often called the

¹ The Seder is a ritual meal eaten as part of the Passover. A bar or bat is a ritual ceremony marking a young man or woman’s agreement to observe the commandments, and usually takes place when he/she is thirteen years old.

“Jewish Jane Austen” for writing “a Jewish novel of manners,”² Goodman is perhaps unique amongst her peers for her embracing of such labels. As she admitted in an interview, “I don’t object to labels as long as they’re additive rather than reductive. In other words, I don’t want to be just a Jewish writer, just a woman Jewish writer. I’m happy to be a Jewish woman American writer who can also be a writer who is allowed to write, who can explore anything she wants to explore” (Harrison-Kahan 2012, 189).³ This essay will consider Goodman’s reputation as a “post-assimilationist” Jewish writer as well as her depiction of a spectrum of Jewish beliefs and practices. It will also attempt to move beyond Orthodox practices and labels and consider what *Kaaterskill Falls* can contribute to a conception of shared, shifting, and contested spaces and the various positions women negotiate within them.

1. Postsecular or post-assimilationist: Goodman and contemporary Jewish fiction

Sanford Pinsker calls 21st century Jewish writers “a raucous and diverse bunch, and one can say of them what was once said about the 20th century triumvirate of Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud—namely, that their Jewish-Jewish fiction is hard to define but easy to recognize.” Pinsker applies the admittedly clumsy “Jewish-Jewish” label to refer to the growing body of fiction that is concerned with traditional Jewish faith and where “observant Jewish characters are no longer stuck into novels only to be roundly dismissed or to provide moments of cheap comic relief” (“Going Everywhere”). This is true for Goodman’s fiction, and she clearly takes her devout, or *frum*, characters seriously; as she stated during an interview, “I don’t use my Hassidic Rabbis symbolically. I use them as individuals....Doctrinal formality does not make a person into a symbol. There is allegory in my work, but my characters are not meant to be figural” (Harrison-Kahan 2012, 192). Goodman’s serious and sustained attempts to create believable, round, and compelling Orthodox characters does not make her an anomaly in her field. S. Lilian Kremer contends that a significant portion of contemporary Jewish writers, Goodman included, focus on the following three issues in their fiction: “Jewish religious thought and values, the trauma of the Holocaust, and the establishment of a Jewish nation in Israel” (1993, 571). I would first like to consider if, and how these three issues

² See, for example Ruth Wisse’s review of *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998). Wisse contends that a novel about “ordinary human beings engaged in ordinary human tasks” wasn’t previously possible.

³This comment was in direct reference to a comment by Cynthia Ozick, who refused to be labeled as a Jewish writer because she found the categorizations it implied derogatory.

manifest themselves in Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls*, which takes as its subject matter a fictional community of devout Orthodox Jews, the Kirshner community.⁴

1.1 Third wave Judaism: "Hansen's law" and "core-to-core" fiction

According to Judith Lewin, fiction by authors like Dara Horn, Tova Mirvis, and Allegra Goodman serve as proof of "Hansen's law," which contends that third generation immigrants will try to reinliven the memories and practices their second generation parents rejected (2008, 50).⁵ She adds that in third generation fiction "the assimilationist model seems squarely set aside; it may not speak to this generation in the way it spoke to Jewish writers and audiences in the past" (66). Goodman herself has addressed the diverse approaches to Jewish heritage and ancestry by writers like Isaac Bashevis Singer and Saul Bellow as follows: "that conflict is a historical artifact. The new generation of Jewish writers doesn't erase the conflict, but we enjoy the tension. It's a dialectic" (Harrison-Kahan 2012, 190). She adds later that, as opposed to previous generations of writers who epitomized what was "still secular Judaism," her generation of fellow-writers feel more comfortable about thematizing more conservative, even Orthodox forms of Judaism (191).⁶ Another way of contextualizing the 'conflict' between Jewish heritage and contemporary American culture in the work of writers like Goodman is to perceive their writing as examples of "core-to-core culture confrontation." This occurs when "an individual is located at the heart of his or her own culture, knows that culture thoroughly, constructs the world through the value system and frames of reference of that culture, and then encounters core elements from another culture" (Chavkin and Potok 1999, 154). Goodman points to the reoccurring depiction of rituals, spirituality, and religion in all of her works, but stresses that she depicts a variety of core cultures, for example Orthodox, scientific, and academic communities. In that sense, she is like other third generation writers who "are not

⁴ In the novel, the Rav is described as the grandson of Jeremiah Solomon Hecht, "the founder in Germany of neoorthodoxy, who wrote in his elegant and stylish German, arguing that the generations to come should study science and languages, law and mathematics—and yet none of these could come before religious law" (Goodman 1998, 15-16). According to Ruth Wisse, this fictional character is based on Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), who encouraged his followers to receive a secular education and work while maintaining strict halakha at home (1998, 68).

⁵ Hansen's law was first described in a 1938 essay by Marcus Lee Hansen entitled "The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant." For an extensive discussion of Hansen's thesis as it applies to Jewish American literature, see Meyer 2004, 108-11.

⁶ Goodman groups her work with that of Nathan Englander, Steve Stern, Tova Mirvis, Dan Horn, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Michael Chabon.

ashamed of being ‘changed’ from their second-generation parents, and they do not plan to change back; they merely hope that they will be appreciated as they are” (Meyer 2004, 117). Seen from this perspective, *Kaaterskill Falls* serves as an exemplary illustration of the post-assimilationist model. Goodman, writing as a third generation Holocaust survivor, also proves the veracity of “Hansen’s Law” in her earnest explorations of Orthodoxy, even if the characters she creates are more often than not second-generation.

In her analysis of *Kaaterskill Falls*, Maya Socolovsky makes the relevant point that “in negotiating a post-assimilationist space, the text has to articulate both of these apparently contradictory inheritances: the tight-knit traditional community’s restrictions on daily practice and thinking, and the secular American definition of freedom as limitless, which seeps into the characters’ conscious memories and experiences even within the Kirshner community” (38). This tension originates the Kirshners commitment to the *halakha*—the body of Jewish laws and practices that govern daily behavior. Berger aptly defines *halakha* as a normative Jewish orthopraxis where “man voluntarily controls his ego in order to align his will with God’s will” in what he perceives to be a free and mutual negotiation of duties and rights (1995, 25-6).⁷ In his series of Talmudic reading, Emanuel Levinas provides some further insights into the *halakha*. He points out, for starters, that:

we know since Maimonides that all that is said of God in Judaism *signifies* through human *praxis*. Judging that the very name “God,” the most familiar to men, also remains the most obscure and subject to every abuse, I am trying to shine a light on it that derives from the very place it has in the texts, from its context, which is understandable to us to the degree that it speaks of the moral experience of human beings. God—whatever this ultimate, and, in some sense, naked meaning—appears to human consciousness (and especially in Jewish experience) “clothed” in values [...]. Religious experience, at least for the Talmud, can only be primarily a moral experience. (1990, 14)

In *Kaaterskill Falls*, Elizabeth Shulman and her husband Isaac represent the clearest manifestations of this description. For Isaac, work is only a means of earning an income:

[i]t doesn’t define him, doesn’t express his inner life. The core of his life is his religion, the practice and study of *halacha*. [...] He is proud of his observance. He cares infinitely about the details of his religious life, the manner in which he prays, the exact timing of each blessing and fast. The less visible the act, the more he cares about it. His pride is in everything hidden, everything private. (Goodman 1998, 141)

⁷ I’ll use this spelling for consistency, although *halacha* is also accepted and widely used.

In an interview, Goodman explained that “[t]he great thing about religion is that it’s formulaic. He [Rabbi Helfgott, a character in *The Cookbook Collector*] says creativity is overrated; why does everybody try to reinvent the wheel? It’s all here. Look in your book. Look in the *siddur* [prayer book]. Your life is prescribed for you. Relax. Embrace it. I’m interested in that tension. There are pros and cons of each path” (Harrison-Kahan 2012, 199). If Isaac represents the positive effects of a total and unquestioning embrace of the strictures of Orthodoxy, then his wife Elizabeth serves as an example of the limits and sacrifices that must also be endured. In contrast to Isaac, Elizabeth feels that “[i]n any case, the things she does and doesn’t do, the things she eats, even the words she utters, are all external for her. Not superficial, but fixed and homely. They don’t really control what she is on the inside; they don’t have anything to do with what she thinks or what she wants” (Goodman 1998, 57). Because her practice is not based on pride, but rather on tradition and obedience, Elizabeth also becomes the character whose faith is more susceptible to feelings of doubt and disenchantment.

The Kirshner community to which Isaac and Elizabeth belong—led by a rabbi who fled Frankfurt after Kristallnacht—have decided to renew their commitment with a fervent zeal; their Rav tells his followers in a *drash*, or sermon, during the High Holidays that “[e]very act we do should be *al Kiddush hashem*—for the glory of God. Every deed to make his name holy. In our homes, in our streets, in our work. Our lives should be lived with one purpose. There should be no division” (248). The Rav urges his followers to be *frum*, regardless of whether they are in public or private, religious or secular spaces; this ignores the fact that the Kirshners will undoubtedly be exposed to, and perhaps tempted by, the free market and secular practices of the broader American community. It is precisely this conflict between one’s rigorous devotion and a simultaneous desire to participate in the broader American culture that nags Elizabeth, for “[t]he sacred isn’t mysterious to her, and so she romanticizes the secular. Poetry, universities, and paintings fill her with awe. Museums, opera houses—although she has never been in one” (54). For Elizabeth, whose exposure to the halakha began as a child in Manchester, the unpredictability, the unknowability of a world not dictated by advice from the Tanakh or Talmud⁸ is a source of wonder and longing. When a secular newlywed couple, academics in the fields of mathematics and literature, move in across the street and dazzle Elizabeth with their religious and secular knowledge, her previously fulfilling family and social life begins to

⁸ The word *Tanakh* is actually an acronym that stands for the books that comprise the Hebrew Bible: the Torah (the Law, or five books of Moses), the Nevi’im (the Prophets) and the Ketuvim (the Psalms). The vast body of rabbinic literature is referred to as the *Talmud*.

feel repressive and small. Slowly, she convinces her husband, and then the Rav, to let her open a store in Kaaterskill selling approved Kosher food for the women in the community during the week while their husbands work in the city. Her idea is both a practical improvement for her Kehilla and a subtle means of exploring the “secular” world that she has long admired from afar. So when the Rav’s son and successor Isaiah gives his first *drash* and admonishes his followers to “build a Kehilla like a fortress,” Elizabeth muses that her little shop has provided a means of escape from the strict rules of the community, and “[d]eep within her she knows that she has scaled those bulwarks of which he speaks” (228).

Elizabeth’s foray outside the community is short-lived; for catering a birthday party without permission and bringing in Kosher food not approved by the Kirshners, Rav Isaiah rules that she has breached the bounds of the letter of permission his father first granted her, and she must close her store as a punishment. Despondent about her lack of autonomy and the rigidity of the Rav’s ruling, Elizabeth confides her disappointment to her neighbor. His response is unexpected: “Andras leans over, speaking conspiratorially. ‘Elizabeth,’ he says, ‘this is the United States of America. You can do whatever you damn well please’” (271). When she sees a help wanted sign in the window of her local grocer a few months after her talk with Andras, she is reminded of his words and asks for the job. Her decision to work for someone is admittedly a step down from being a shop owner herself, but it is a choice that provides limited, and for Elizabeth essential, contact with the outside, secular world without putting her at risk of censure by her community. The choice, Goodman seems to imply, is healthy and balanced, a sign of Elizabeth’s maturity and pragmatism. It is also in line with the last lines of the prayer that ends the Sabbath: *Hamavdil ben kodesh lihol*. On the last page of the novel, Goodman’s characters discuss an apt English translation of this admonition:

“Blessed be he who separates the holy from the profane,” Isaac says.

“The sacred from the secular,” puts in Elizabeth.

“The transcendent moment from the workaday world,” suggests old Rabbi Sobel in his quavering voice.

“Mm.” They pause around the smoking candle. (324)

Ultimately, it is the halakha as depicted in *Kaaterskill Falls* that cauterizes the wounds it is partially responsible for creating, that helps the characters find the demarcation between secular and sacred, transcendent and quotidian. Again, Levinas is useful for understanding this apparent contradiction, for he notes that “[o]riginating communally, in collective law and commandment, ritual is not at all external to conscience. It conditions it and permits it to enter

into itself and to stay awake. It preserves it, prepares its healing” (1990, 17). By the end of the novel, the consistency of the halakha have both constituted the dam Elizabeth unwittingly ran against and the buoy that held her afloat in the aftermath of the collision. After the birth of her sixth daughter, which occurs a few months after she is forced to close her store, Elizabeth remains committed to her faith and practices, even if she feels for the first time that “following is work” (Goodman 1998, 250). At the same time she wonders “will she view the pattern of her days as brightly, or say her prayers as gratefully? When will she observe the holidays with the pleasure of the past years? When will she cook again with such joy?” (295) By the end of the novel, she ultimately finds “beauty in this. Such observance is ordinary to her mind, but there is something beautiful in the constant conscious and unconscious work, the labor of it, ornamenting each day with prayer, dedicating each month, and season, and every act, to God” (310-11).

1.2 Holocaust representation: Peripheral justice in *Kaaterskill Falls*

Berel Lang’s study, *Holocaust Representations*, ruminates on the hindrances for an author who attempts to write about the Shoah, and “[t]he most fundamental one appears as a doubting or disquiet in the act of writing itself, that is, in the writer’s appeal to the imagination in the face of the literal, nonimagined fact of the Holocaust to which it is the author’s evident purpose to give voice” (2000, 37). The Holocaust does not figure prominently in any of Goodman’s fiction, which could be interpreted as evidence of personal doubt or discomfort overruling the impulse to try to testify about the Shoah. But as Ezra Cappell contends, Goodman’s “major contribution to Holocaust representation has been and continues to be her wry and often disturbing evocation of the uses—historical, personal, often selfish, and always conflicted and complicated—which her Americanized Jewish characters make of Holocaust memory” (2007, 125). He adds that “Goodman is one of the most forceful and eloquent voices speaking for the third generation of survivors who try to warily circle the legacy of suffering bestowed upon them, fifty years removed from the events of the Holocaust” (2002, 445).

Through the character of Andras, Goodman presents one way of processing the Shoah: by refusing to speak of its atrocities, essentially burying it in the unnamed past. Irving Greenberg refers to the post-Shoah halakha as a “voluntary covenant” because “God can no longer enforce or educate for the covenant by punishment. The most horrifying of the curses and punishments threatened in the Torah for failing to live up to the covenant pale by comparison with what was done in the Holocaust” (qtd. in Berger 1995, 27). Andras, a

Holocaust survivor, decides that he can no longer honor the covenant and its corresponding rules and restrictions, for he “has none of this reassurance. He has only the conviction that there is nothing in heaven but cold space and stars, and that if there is a god, he scatters his creation and lets lives fall where they may, seeding good and barren places alike” (Goodman 1998, 230-1). A successful toy seller and secular Jew married to a zealously Orthodox Argentinian wife, Andras escaped to France and later America with his two sisters, but lost the rest of his extended family and friends in the concentration camps. Andras refuses to discuss his experiences with his wife or their children, his rationale being that “there is no way for him to convey his experience....You can never fully tell another person what you know. You can’t imagine what you don’t know. There is no way to conceive, to picture, someone else’s life. There is no way to transfer memories” (45). Still, in the storyworld Goodman creates, the choice to remain silent, to close oneself off from the past has its consequences. Andras feels a permanent distance from his family and his wife, and is only at ease around his sisters. This becomes a source of inner conflict for him, and he resolves at the end of the novel to at least make an effort to overcome his aversion towards his family, his instinct to close himself off from affection and proximity. Kneeling next to his sleeping wife, he “speaks to her in his mind. And because he cannot wake her, asking her to forgive him, he silently forgives her: for being well in body and mind, for remembering without pain, for living and dreaming apart from him, in her own time” (320). It’s significant that this moment of repentance is a silent one.

The second means of adapting after the Shoah depicted in *Kaaterskill Falls* is by means of retreat into the religious. This is Rav Elijah Kirshner’s method; his aim is to strengthen his community’s commitment to the halakha as a means of protecting and preserving the Jewish faith and peoples. Still, this turning away from the world, this burying oneself in the Talmud and the Tanakh also has its consequences. Watching his community make their way to *Shul*⁹ on the Sabbath, the Rav notes that “[i]n America everything is smaller and more private. Missing, and impossible to reclaim, is the old confidence about the world. A holocaust of blood has washed away his congregation’s pretensions to a natural place, a decorative culture, a luxuriant liberal education” (98). After suffering a stroke, his feelings about his followers grow even more pessimistic. He calls them simple people “afraid of the mind” who no longer attend university and can no longer think (106). What he fails to realize is that his own strict doctrines,

⁹ *Shul* is Yiddish for synagogue, and is typically used by Orthodox Jews to refer to their place of worship. The word synagogue—a Greek translation of the Hebrew *beit kneset*, or place of assembly—is the term preferred by Conservative Jews. The word temple is commonly used by Reformed communities.

admittedly combined with a reticence on his followers' part to immerse themselves in a secular culture, that have made them so timid and one-sided in their learning and devotion. In fact, the Rav's strict observance, combined with his attempt to isolate only those parts of the past that rise above the horrific realities of the 20th century, makes his home a stagnant mortuary rather than an inviting shelter for his descendants. The Rav's son Jeremy, a secular scholar, returns home after a long period of estrangement to find "[t]here is a stench about all the old things in the house. They reek. They are like freshly killed birds with the flesh still on them. They have no delicacy, no formal and anonymous beauty; they smell only of death" (28). We are told that Jeremy was also a promising Talmudic scholar and rabbi, far exceeding his brother with his exegetic insights, yet he chooses to turn away from the stench of history he finds in his father's home and belief: "he had every accomplishment necessary to succeed his father: a deep knowledge of halakha, a vast Talmudic repertoire, fluency in legal conventions and mishradic language. He had everything except a respect for the spirit of the law, and a belief in it as more than ancient text and arcane ritual. He would not live the life" (185).

1.3 Baal Teshuvah: Or Elizabeth's (non)return

The final characteristic of contemporary Jewish American fiction in Kremer's triumvirate includes a focus on Israel's fraught status. This, like references to the Holocaust, manifests itself only on the margins of Goodman's fiction, with *Kaaterskill Falls* being no exception. When Elizabeth's eldest daughter, Chani, asks her mother why they never talk about Israel, the narrator informs us that "[t]he Kirshners are waiting for the perfect Israel, as the Rav puts it. They won't settle for less" (65). For this reason, Goodman's novel doesn't precisely fit Kremer's typology. Unlike Zionists, Goodman's Kirshners devote their time and efforts to their daily religious practice. The characters are not trying to recreate an ideal Israel in Washington Heights and Kaaterskill Falls, rather they are devoted to maintaining a supportive community that expounds Jewish practices and ideals.

While it differs from Kremer's model, the focus on local observance rather than Israel, is not uncommon in contemporary Jewish fiction. Judith Lewin calls instances of such thematic focus as examples of *baal teshuvah*, or religious returning.¹⁰ She cites Dar Horn, Ruchama King, and Allegra Goodman as authors who are interested in "the return of contemporary Jewish women to religious practice, to a Jewish sense of self and community, and to a Jewish

¹⁰ A *baal teshuva* is "one who returns" to the Jewish faith after leaving or lapsing in practice; the name can also be used to refer to those who become more observant.

spirituality and faith” (2008, 49). This may be true of characters in Goodman’s novels *Intuition*, *The Cookbook Collector*, and *The Family Markowitz*, but I would argue that in the case of *Kaaterskill Falls*, one can better use the words reinvestment or enlivenment, for the characters never really depart from their belief or practices in the first place. The one character in *Kaaterskill Falls* that can be considered a *baal teshuvah* would be Elizabeth. As I already explained, her brief enchantment with the outside secular world and her failed attempt to make choices for herself and her fledgling business caused her to be aware of the restrictive, limiting aspects of her faith for the first time. Although leaving her faith was never a consideration of hers, her “scaling the walls” of the Kehilla only to be called back and reprimanded by her Rav do arguably constitute a departure and return. Yet what makes this different from the *baal teshuvah* depicted in other Jewish American narratives, is Elizabeth’s unfailing commitment to a stable institutionalized faith and practice.

In fact, one can even interpret her brief period of doubt following her reprimand by the Rav an important step in her religious development; for Levinas makes the point that only from the necessary distance derived by processes of desacralization can humanity see the divine:

I have always asked myself if holiness, that is, separation or purity, the essence without admixture that can be called the Spirit and which animates the Jewish tradition—or to which the Jewish tradition aspires—can dwell in a world that has not been desacralized. I have asked myself—and that is the real question—whether the world is sufficiently desacralized to receive such purity. (1990, 141)

Elizabeth must first distance herself from her Kehilla in order to view it, and her commitment to the halakha, with an objective eye. As we are told in the beginning of the novel, her faith was something she grew up with, a given part of her daily life that she never stopped to consider because it seemed natural and because she had never known anything else. For Elizabeth, “religious life is not something she can cast off; it’s part of her. Its rituals are not rituals to her, not objects, but instincts. She lives inside them and can’t hold them up to look at. That is the beauty of the secular world—she can examine it. And yet she’d like to hold it more closely; really touch it” (Goodman 1998, 57). By briefly interacting with the outside world as a business owner, Elizabeth learns that the non-religious life is not only culture, pleasure, and freedom. The shop exhausts her with its bureaucratic minutiae, she is exposed to the racism of the non-Orthodox townspeople in Kaaterskill, and most importantly, she is made painfully aware of her submissive position in the community as a woman and as a follower when the Rav’s son rescinds her license on a technicality. As result of these painful experiences, Elizabeth is dislodged from her position as a complacent *frum* and made aware, for the first time in her life,

that her body and her daily practices are not entirely in her own control. Fully conscious for the first time in her life of the limitations imposed by her spiritual beliefs and her religious community, Elizabeth nevertheless remains faithful. In a desacralized world, she finally learns that belief is a conscious choice with consequences, albeit something she will not abandon.

Maya Socolovsky argues that *Kaaterskill Falls* “centralizes women’s roles even more powerfully at the end, as if to signify that Elizabeth’s disappointment has actually strengthened her resolve and piety” (41). And Ruth Wisse adds that this is what makes Elizabeth the hero of the novel, for “[a]s it says in *Ethics of the Fathers*, ‘Who is a hero? He who stifles his urge.’ By exposing us to Elizabeth’s restlessness, Goodman has created a genuine heroine—one who stifles her urge” (2004, 69). Stephen Schneider adds that in Goodman’s fiction, both religious and secular characters must learn to “adjust to the losses they sustain” and “look for resolution within the status quo rather than making bids for expanding freedoms” (2001). In that case, should Elizabeth be heralded a hero? Is the fact that she “is equipped to recover from her disappointment and isolation because of her lifetime structure of prayer and observance” (Socolovsky 2004, 39) combined with the centrality of her role as mother and wife something to be praised? Reading of *Kaaterskill Falls* as a good example of how to settle for less, or how to lower one’s expectations, seems incongruous with the fact that the hero of the novel is the one whose reduced expectations are primarily the result of her subordinate status within a given cultural community, something she cannot control or change.

2. Beyond belief: Contested spaces, conflicted bodies

In his review of *Kaaterskill Falls*, Sanford Pinsker praised the novel for the ways in which it “makes the ultra-Orthodox look simultaneously exotic and familiar” (1998). Thus far, this essay has probed the “exotic” religious facets of the novel, in particular the seemingly dichotomous aspects of strict halakhic observance and freedom. These aspects of the novel are inseparable from the religious beliefs that gird them, but that should not imply that the novel can only be analyzed as a thematization of Judaic faith. The remainder of this essay will attempt to pick out aspects of the text that are more “familiar” because they can be more easily separated from the religious and because they are arguably relevant and recognizable for secular and religious readers alike. To be more specific, I’d like to argue that *Kaaterskill Falls* successfully explores the tenuous position of minority groups within a broader society; it also provides some meaningful meditations on the position of the self toward the (nondenominational) sacred and the position of gendered bodies toward each other.

2.1 Locating the group: Halakhic heterotopias

In a lecture given in 1967 to the Circle of Architectural Studies entitled “Of other spaces,” Michel Foucault defined space as a series of emplacements, or discrete positions within an “infinitely open space,” whose parameters are defined by their relation to each other (1986, 23). One subcategory of emplacement, Foucault argued, is the heterotopia—an “effectively realized utopia in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (24). The key here is that a heterotopia in some way challenges or highlights the perceived norms and rules of the surrounding emplacements. In *Kaaterskill Falls*, the Kirshners, like other religious minority groups, challenge both the predominant established faith in the United States and the secular practices of most citizens outside their Kehilla. Like all heterotopias, the community also serves a socially-constructed function: in this case to preserve, protect, and practice Orthodox Judaism. In other words, the Kirshner community, whether located in New York City or upstate, serves as an example of what Foucault terms a heterotopia of deviation because it is inhabited by people “whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm” (25). Foucault adds that society can change the parameters and rules of a heterotopia at any time, and the Kirshner’s migration from the city to the countryside every summer drastically changes the physical and ideological makeup of the physical spaces they temporarily inhabit, a fact that makes the permanent residents in Kaaterskill particularly resentful (Goodman 1998, 60-1). Still, it’s worth noting that the only “deviant” thing about Orthodox Kirshners is the *strictness* of their religious observance. For historically, Jewish Americans met with little opposition from the rest of their countrymen, nor were they subjected to discriminatory legislation like other religious and cultural groups in America; “Jews, unlike African Americans, Americans of Chinese and Japanese ancestry, and Native Americans, never needed to view government—the formal apparatus of society, its courts, its legislature, its elected leadership, and indeed even its key text, the Constitution, as the source of their sorrows” (Diner 2010, 62). In other words, Jews “enjoyed a place of respectability in the American setting” (65). In *Kaaterskill Falls*, we can find passing reference to this historically tolerant relationship between the religious and public institutions; in the descriptions of Rav Kirshner in the beginning of the novel, we are told that he “is an extraordinary man. And famous. He knows the mayor of New York, has led prayers in the state legislature. *The New York Times* calls him ‘The Reverend Doctor’” (Goodman 1998, 16).

Victoria Aarons maintains that *Kaaterskill Falls* depicts “the family as a microcosm of community, the place of generational continuity and rift—where ethical formations are both acted out and discarded, and where guidelines for living among others, scripted or encoded, can be played out in exaggerated and thus extravagant forms framed by displaced anxieties, guilt, and self-enacted punishment” (2004, 15). I’ve already discussed the intricacies of Orthodox community formations in the previous sections, but when examining them again as instable heterotopias of deviation, it’s possible to see their precarious emplacement within the broader non-Jewish society as a “heterochronism” as well. Foucault discusses the two ways in which a heterotopia is “linked to slices of time.” Citing the library and museum as examples of the first type of heterochronic time, Foucault argues that these emplacements accumulate time, or attempt to “enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes” with the goal of “constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages” (Foucault 1986, 26). For the three generations of Kirshners living in their enclaves in Washington Heights and Kaaterskill Falls, their emplacement serves as a memorial to what has been lost, an attempt to preserve or freeze a tradition, and it is even a place where hope has long since died. This includes those like the Rav who “cannot believe in the world anymore” (Goodman 1998, 219). We are told that “[t]he Rav chose to leave, and he chose a new life, a life of grater separation. He has built a community of vigilance, a careful cautious American generation. How strange that none of them see their piety is a way of mourning. How strange the way they embrace it in its severity. They don’t know the difference” (219).

This doesn’t mean that a heterotopia must be solemn a memorial to suffering or persecution. The second heterochronic time Foucault describes—itsself akin to Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque—is one where time is futile, transitory, and above all festive. Foucault uses the fairground and the vacation village as examples (Foucault 1986, 26), the latter of which aptly describes the Kirshner’s summer retreat in Kaaterskill; the characters look forward to their summer holidays in Kaaterskill because “everything is easier” (Goodman 1998, 6). The Kaaterskill community owes its existence to the Rav’s wife, who encouraged first her husband, and then the community, to use their reparation money to buy property upstate so they could have a break both from the city and the burden of their memories (251-2).

2.2 Locating the gendered self: Ashes chayil miyimtza?¹¹

As I mentioned already, a potentially difficult facet of Orthodox practice for an outsider to understand is the subordinate position of women, and Goodman is not unaware of the conflict this may cause in her readership; she admits that the novel was an attempt at “creating this moment that would make the reader think, and feel troubled” (qtd. in Cappell 2007, 123). When understood as a part of a voluntary commitment to the Jewish faith, the glaring gender disparities are admittedly lessened, but like Orthodox communities in the same period, the male characters in Goodman’s novel may attend *Shul* to learn, whilst the women may not. Men may participate in the Shabbat service, but women must remain silent behind a curtained partition. Although women may work and attend school, they must dress modestly and after marriage must cover their hair with either a *shietel* or a kerchief.¹² After her run-in with the Rav, Elizabeth is more conscious of the restrictions she has honored her whole life, and while looking at her newborn (and sixth) daughter, Elizabeth’s thoughts turn to the limitations she will face as a girl: “Elizabeth looks at the infant lying there. She is sound asleep, even though her parents do not have a girl’s name. Of course, the baby does not care that she has no name. She sleeps there with all her life before her. And yet so much has already been decided” (Goodman 1998, 282).

Still, the Judaic liturgy praises women, most notably at the welcoming of the Shabbat, and this fact is granted due attention in the novel. Whilst reciting the opening passages from Psalms, Isaac has the following epiphany about his wife:

The children are singing, although, of course, they aren’t listening to the words; no one really listens. But tonight Isaac sees Elizabeth in that poem, the song everyone sings. He sees that the poem is not simply about the ideal wife, but about Elizabeth in particular. For Elizabeth is the woman who would plant a business, buy and sell, create something with her industry. She is the woman who deserves the fruit of her hands. (158)

At the end of his meditations on the heterotopic and heterochronic facets of emplacements, Foucault muses that “perhaps our life is still ruled by a certain number of oppositions that cannot be touched, that institution and practice have not yet dared to undermine;...these are

¹¹ “Who can find a virtuous wife?” (Proverbs 31:10) Elizabeth’s family sings this in their Kabbalat Shabbat (Goodman 157-8); the welcoming of the Sabbath on Friday typically consists of a recitation of Psalms 95 through 99, Psalm 29, 92, and 93 as well as singing of hymns and a reading from the Talmud.

¹² A married Orthodox woman covers her hair with either a *shietel* (wig) or kerchief to because exposing her hair in public would be considered a sign of *ervah*—nakedness or impropriety.

animated by an unspoken sacralization.” This is evidenced in the novel in the description of Elizabeth’s transformative housekeeping, for “in the city, and especially in winter, Isaac is amazed at the way Elizabeth makes their home shine against the black streets. Against the sirens and traffic, the dirty ice outside, the apartment seems to rise like a giant yellow moon” (157). In the context of the novel, we discover that gender has little impact on the conviction or power of observance for its characters; regarding their daily morning prayers, we are told that Isaac “will put on the tefillin there, wrapping his arms with leather straps....Elizabeth will pray in the house as soon as she can, in the time she finds. She will not put on tefillin, but, like Isaac, she will bind herself to the commandments. She will not fold herself in a tallis, but like him, she will fold herself in prayer” (294-5).¹³

Even if equal in their devotion, this does not absolve the discrepancy in Elizabeth and Isaac’s access to a religious, even secular, education. In *Kaaterskill Falls*, Goodman reveals that this is no hard and fast rule. Jeremy Kirshner, after inheriting his father’s vast collection of books—much to the consternation of his devout brother—insists they be moved to his house. In a bout of anger and mourning, he begins dumping the boxes of books, stopping to pick up “just a few from the top of the pile, a volume of Plato and a collection of poetry, some Goethe, and Moses Mendelssohn, and he sets them on his desk. He opens on and then another, and then he sees with a shock of surprise and recognition, not his father but his mother’s signature on the inside of each cover” (307). He realizes that his education, which drove him from his father’s favor and eventually took the place of his religious ambitions, was due to his mother’s influence, and obviously her own unutilized and unrecognized intellectual capabilities. She could not become a scholar herself, but Jeremy’s observant mother could make “his learning her triumph of self-expression” (308).

In spite of this subtle recognitions of the power of women within the private realm of the household, a lingering feeling remains that the women in the text have settled for less than they deserve because that is what they are expected—even required—to do. Again, Levinas offers insight into this problem, and although it does not propose any alteration to the relationships between men and women within the Judaic tradition, it helps a secular observer better understand the nuances of the interactions. Levinas’ midrash on the sixth folio of the Talmudic Tractate *Berakhot*, “And God Created Woman” tries to parse out the two divergent

¹³ The *teffilin* and *tallis* are donned during morning prayer. The *teffilin* consist of leather straps for the head and arm that contain leather pouches holding Torah passages in accordance with Deuteronomy 6:8 “thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes.” The *tallis* is a tasseled prayer shawl.

stances toward the woman: “according to the first sage, she is strictly contemporary with man; according to the dissenter, to come into being, a woman required a new act of creation” (1990, 169). The first stance contends that woman was made in the same creative act as man; woman and man constitute two aspects of the same face. As descendants of one body, one act on God’s part to create a being in his image, this stance contends that God wanted from the beginning “two separate and equal beings” (173). Still, there had to be some distinction between the created beings, as “this initial independence of two equal beings would no doubt have meant war. It had to be done not strictly according to justice, which would demand two separate beings. To create a world, he had to subordinate one to the other” (173). Following this logic, women were made subordinate, but only in order to keep the peace.

The second, opposing stance states that man and woman were created in two separate creative acts. Man was the first, and for that reason he is thus the legitimate bearer of certain privileges. Yet being first has its drawbacks for man is the first who must answer for his “freely chosen acts” and he is the “hostage of the universe” (171). And most likely, woman—the second and presumably improved act of creation—is more wholly human, an improved model, as it were. Levinas further parses the implications of a reading of Genesis that envisions two acts of creation by making a distinction between public and private realms, and interior versus exterior positioning:

I think of the last chapter of Proverbs, of the woman praised there; she makes possible the life of men; she is the home of men. But the husband has a life outside the home; He sits on the Council of the city; he has a public life; he is at the service of the universal; he does not limit himself to interiority, to intimacy, to the home, although without them he could know nothing. (169)

In other words, “[m]an and women, when authentically human, work together as responsible beings. The sexual is only an accessory to the human” (170). The image of ‘responsible beings’ harkens back to a point I made earlier about stifling one’s urges, and the distinction made between the separate realms, or areas of influence for males and females is reflected in the novel in Isaac’s wonder at his wife’s transformative housekeeping.

Levinas attempts to arrive at a synthesis of these two positions by looking for points of intersection, or similarity between the genders. For him, “[h]umanity is not thinkable on the basis of two entirely different principles. There had to have been a *sameness* that these *others* had in common....Subordination was needed, and a wound was needed; suffering was and is needed to unite equals and unequals” (173). In that sense, he rationalizes the “importance of a certain inequality” and even claims that there may be a “perfect equality and even superiority

of woman, who is capable of giving advice and direction” (174). Still, according to Talmudic customs, “it is the man who must nevertheless, regardless of the goal, indicate the direction in which to walk” (175). The man is ordered to lead, but it is the woman whose hand on his shoulder and words in his ears influencing his direction. Again, we can find evidence of this cultural ethos in *Kaaterskill Falls*, where both Jeremy’s mother and Elizabeth act as guides to the men in their lives, even if this is the extent of their ability to steer.

Ranen Omer-Sherman writes that “Goodman offers a chilling meditation on the fragility of one generation’s ability to transmit its values to the next” (2004, 92). I have to disagree with the choice of adjective; for some readers, especially those who find the gender roles and conventions depicted in the novels unnerving, this fragility is one way of coming to terms with the unresolved ending of the novel, where very little has changed in the lives of the characters. In fact, the uncertainty of the future is not a source of angst or sadness for the characters in Goodman’s storyworld either. At the end of *Kaaterskill Falls*, Elizabeth muses on the various paths open to her daughters, and her tone is neither wistful nor reproachful:

She wonders, even now, what her daughters will inherit and discover. Whether they will shake themselves and venture out, even if only to touch the larger world; the city with its thousand neighborhoods and businesses, its traffic, its steel bridges pointing to far places. Whether they will take exotic paths, researching in libraries or entering law school, learning languages, and she doesn’t know what else. Or whether, like their father, they will absorb themselves in the life and turn, heart and mind, toward the Kehilla. (Goodman 1998, 310)

By this point in the novel, Elizabeth has reconfirmed her commitment to the Kehilla and has felt a return of a sense of joy with her devotion to the halakha. But this comes only after she has made a small place for herself outside the Kehilla that can satiate her desire for independence and provide an outlet for her creative impulses. Furthermore, her ruminations on the ‘fragile’ future are not fearful, but open to the multiple paths and “larger worlds” that she hopes will be available for her daughters.

Goodman, when writing the novel, had already experienced firsthand many of the changes in the American Jewish population in the quarter of a century following the time span of the storyworld. The last expansive study of Jewish Americans, the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), found that 43% of respondents were married to non-Jewish partners (Sheeskin). In the novel, a secular Jewish couple’s naming ceremony of their baby girl, which is treated with polite bewilderment by the Orthodox partygoers who have never heard of such a thing (Goodman 1998, 266-71), has become today a commonplace occurrence.

Concerted efforts on the part of Jewish feminists have resulted in significant changes in the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaic movements, namely that women may now wear the tefillin, enter the synagogue dais to read from the Torah, and even become rabbis (Nadell 2010, 92-3). Even in the most Orthodox communities, women are now allowed to train as halakhic authorities, the rationalization being that *Torah I'shmah* (learning for its own sake) is a right for both genders, and can furthermore help uphold and spread knowledge about the Talmudic law and practice (Nadell 2010, 99).

3. At the crossroads: Culture and appreciation

Regardless of the nuances of gender hierarchy, Levinas contends that there is one position that should be avoided at all costs. Unsurprising, considering his broader body of work, he writes that the compilation of the body is irrelevant if the mind is only turned toward itself, if it fails to reach out toward the other. This is the position of “the one who, outside the rituals and the law, which are only the *letter*, believes himself to be ‘in spirit and in truth’ in the most intimate intimacy of Being. Here he is thrown into the shoreless abysses of interiority. It has never given back those it has succeeded in seducing” (1990, 177). In yet another Talmudic reading, “The Temptation of Temptation,” Levinas ruminates on what makes interiority, in particular philosophical inquiry, so enticing. He writes that “[w]hat is tempting is to be simultaneously outside everything and participating in everything” (34). This illusion of involvement casts us into the “shoreless abysses” of ourselves, but more importantly, it deprives us of the opportunity to experience the good—even the Divine—as it manifests itself in the other. For in our contact with others, “we see traces of the difficult paths which lead to the comprehension of the Divine, coming to light only at the crossroads of human journeyings, if one can express it like this. It is these human journeyings which call to our attention the Divine” (32). Regardless of one’s personal stance toward belief, *Kaaterskill Falls* provides a vivid description of such human journeyings, and can therefore be seen as a valid, valuable attempt to share what is internal, to encourage a honest contemplation of the Orthodox other for readers. Victoria Aarons takes the opposite stance, contending instead that

the discomfort with the habitual compromise for the successfully assimilated American Jew, reveals an unease so profound that the fear of being *kept out* has, ironically, be reconstructed here as the fear of being *cast out*, expelled by an historical if not mythic Jewish community, the very association with which would make them forever outsiders in secular America. As a result, characters emerge who are preoccupied with what is missing, missing both in terms of an imagined communal Jewish past...and missing in

terms of a securely integrated place in the rapid exchange rate of a forever fashionably mutating American cultural ethos. (2004, 24)

I disagree with her statement; in my reading of *Kaaterskill Falls*, the characters are all open to encounters with the other; furthermore, the novel serves as a sounding chamber for a variety of worldviews—Orthodox Jews, Protestant judges, evangelical housewives, agnostic landlords, even secular academics are all focalized in the novel. Finally, there is little “missing” in these characters lives; they are simply making their way in the world.

In an interview, when asked about the prevalence of third-person omniscient narrators in her work, Goodman responded that “[i]t’s hard for me to stick to one point of view because one of the things I enjoy most about writing fiction is that kind of theater-in-the-round feeling, where you can move around and show what the other person is thinking....And that’s something that fiction can do that no other kind of art can do in quite the same way, to get the reader inside the minds and hearts of so many different kinds of people. If you’re interested in exploring moral ambiguity—if you’re interested in writing about people and their complexities as flawed, where nobody’s purely a villain and no one’s purely a hero” (Harrison-Kahan 2012, 194-5). This ties in nicely to Chaim Potok’s observation that, “[n]ovels are bridges of communication. That’s probably one of the reasons so many non-Jews read my work. They feel themselves involved in the same problems. Once you get through the costuming and the particular cultural elements, you become caught up in the universal problems and passions of the people I write about” (Chavkin and Potok 1999, 155). The same experience, I would argue, occurs when reading *Kaaterskill Falls*.

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