

## “Confounding Closed Systems”: transforming the boundaries of Jewish identity in Rebecca Goldstein’s novel *Mazel*.

### Abstract

*In contemporary Jewish American fiction, the themes of immigration and resettlement take on a renewed significance. In various short stories and novels, a threefold composition – (prewar) life in Europe, the transatlantic journey and settlement in America – serves as a starting point for the contemplation of postwar Jewish American identity. Rebecca Goldstein’s novel *Mazel* is an excellent example of this. The novel reconstructs the lives of three generations of women in a setting that covers both prewar Europe and postwar suburban America. It portrays the complex mother-daughter relationships and depicts the different worlds that each woman inhabits – worlds that are unknown to the others. But this novel also deals with the notions of origin, belonging and not belonging, the possible continuity of tradition, and different definitions of Jewish identity. This essay suggests that Goldstein portrays a constant struggle with ethnic or communal identity – a struggle or tension structured around inclusiveness and exclusiveness – that results in a broadening of the concept of Jewish identity. The novel attains this by challenging and undermining fixed or predetermined ideas and dichotomies (man/woman, shtetl/outside world, tradition/modernity, Europe/America, past/present, descent/consent). Instead, *Mazel* eventually offers the idea of a more hybrid and flexible definition of Jewish identity that favors the fusion of a strong communal identity with the possibility of multiple affiliations. These ideas are specifically rendered through the character of Fraydel, the sister of one of the main protagonists.*

### The European Jewish past in contemporary Jewish American fiction

From the 1980s onwards, Jewish American literature has experienced a striking and significant revival. Young writers of the New Wave have started to explore their Jewish identity in innovative ways. To this end, they do not restrict themselves to the boundaries of their native country. Rather, contemporary Jewish American writers demonstrate the truth of Ruth Wisse’s claim about the importance of Jewish worlds outside the geographical boundaries of America – of extending those boundaries “to an unlikely shtetl, to Israel [...], to other times and climes” (1976: 45) – in the further development of Jewish American fiction

since the 1970s. These contemporary Jewish American writers return in time and space to other episodes and sites of Jewish history. Victoria Aarons argues that, “while one would expect that a preoccupation with the past would fade as the immigrant’s marginalized status in America became less distinct, awash in the rapid ascension into the middle class, on the contrary, we find a growing preoccupation with an even more vigorously imagined past” (1996: 170). The writers of the New Wave even focus on the European Jewish past in order to explore “the continued power of origins” (Howe 1977: 6). Ursula Zeller argues that “it is the Old World – the primary diaspora ambivalently experienced as *galut* [exile] and as home – which for many American Jews constitutes Jewish ‘homeland,’ if an imaginary, sentimentalized one” (2003: 16-17). Contemporary Jewish American novels and stories return to the European Jewish past and depict both European Jewish life and the process of voluntary departure or abrupt expulsion from this site. Europe becomes a quintessential site of reference and the European Jewish past thus becomes the great signifier that influences contemporary Jewish identity. Often, the representation of the European past also includes the portrayal of the prewar Jewish shtetl; a place that has become a symbolical site of ancestral origins and “the source of a collective folk identity rooted in a particular past” (Roskies 1999: 57).

### **The immigration story revisited**

Rebecca Goldstein’s novel *Mazel* also revisits the grounds of the original European Jewish homeland – both the rural prewar shtetl and the bustling urban environment of Warsaw. The novel recounts the story of three generations of women in a setting that covers both prewar Europe and suburban America. Sasha grew up in Shluftchev, a Galician shtetl, but after the suicide of her sister Fraydel she and her parents went to Warsaw. Inspired by the world of theater and the possibility of acting, she joins the Bilbul Art Theater and becomes very successful with the staging of one of Fraydel’s gloomy but gripping stories, called “The Bridegroom”. When the Nazis invade Poland, Sasha manages to escape to Israel and then to America, where she marries and gives birth to her daughter, Chloe. *Mazel* starts with Sasha and Chloe located in the suburb of Lipton, New Jersey, where they are to attend the wedding of Chloe’s daughter Phoebe. Sasha is distraught and angry because of Phoebe’s decision to return to Jewish Orthodoxy and to plant her roots in Lipton – according to Sasha a mirror image of the suffocating shtetl Shluftchev. However, the novel surprisingly ends with a wedding dance that reconnects the different generations and appears to celebrate both Orthodox tradition and liberal inclusiveness.

In revisiting Jewish Europe for much of her novel, Goldstein suggests both the importance and predominance of origins and tradition, and the struggle with communal obligations and fixed ethnic identity. The novel charts a trajectory from a more isolated, predetermined sense of identity towards a broadening of Jewish identity. The novel presents various manifestations of “home” and “belonging”,

different definitions of Jewish identity, and evolves towards an idea of identity as a continuous “positioning”. The consequence is a constant re-evaluation of “Jewishness”, and the confrontation between diverse worlds and different viewpoints and positions. The novel thus chronicles the dynamics of change and the redefinition of Jewish identity throughout the secondary diasporic migration. Moreover, this dynamics reflects a constant confrontation with spatial and temporal dimensions: a negotiation with the site of settlement and the space left behind, on the one hand, and with one’s current identity and past history on the other hand.

Structurally, the novel’s chronological line is regularly disrupted by temporal and spatial leaps. Burstein has pointed out that “[t]he novel is deeply concerned with the shape of time, circling back and forth narratively to suggest the interlacing of widely divergent moments in each character’s life” (Burstein 2001: 90). Starting from the description of the suburb of Lipton, New Jersey, the text quickly shifts gears to look back at shtetl life and the Warsaw episodes, in order to conclude with a return to Lipton. In this way, the European past becomes curiously framed by the American episodes and thus defined as a profound and inherent part of contemporary Jewish life. Flashbacks and flash-forwards are extensively used, the division between the different scenes is sometimes vague and the switch between them abrupt. Furthermore, Goldstein makes use of doubles, repeats phrases and entire passages, and uses the characterization of one character for another. Elements and objects reappear in different contexts. Through recurring sentences, characterizations and events, the novel accentuates a disruption of the dichotomy between past and present and highlights the factor of continuity as a force that counters change and rupture. The novel relies heavily on passages that refer to the past or point forward to events. In each instance, the present moment does not remain isolated. The style of the novel also presents a kind of capriciousness and fluidity. The novel’s use of different stories and shifting narrative accentuates its multiplicity. It becomes clear that Goldstein’s *Mazel* counters unequivocal viewpoints or seemingly unchanging and preset divisions.

### **The shtetl between homeland and exile**

*Mazel* not only describes a range of diasporic and exilic Jewish homes but it links specific geographical sites with specific conceptions of Jewish identity. One of these quintessential Jewish sites is of course the shtetl. However, if this archetypal space is initially portrayed as a place where Jewish identity is clearly defined and Jewish lives are demarcated in the most unambiguous ways, in this novel the shtetl becomes seriously challenged. Both internally and externally, both literally and metaphorically, the site is under pressure by forces that defy its unity and singularity. Thus, the stability of the shtetl as a rural core of

ethnic categorization is deconstructed in *Mazel*. In this way, Goldstein undermines fixed notions of identity and belonging.

First of all, the shtetl is already inherently ambiguous, situated as it is between homeland and exile. In the classic *World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe argues that in the world of the shtetl, the “events of Jewish life were divided into two endless days, the Biblical yesterday and the exile of today” (1976: 12). *Mazel* is keenly attuned to this dichotomy. Shtetl life is centered on and defined by various religious rituals that commemorate specific biblical events pertaining to the history of the Jewish people. The performance of these rites ties the shtetl community to its biblical history, both linking it to the Promised Land and accentuating its exile from the biblical country. The emphasis on religious Holy Days constructs a “sacred historical narrative” that gives the shtetl the status of a “Jerusalem in exile” (Miron 2000: 46, 45). Moreover, it highlights the fact that Jewish identity in the shtetl is especially defined in religious terms. However, at the same time that the exilic condition is emphasized, the shtetl is also characterized and accepted as a genuine homeland. For example, the novel describes the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when it is “the custom to go and pray beside the graves of one’s relatives” (1995: 129). The cemetery has a quintessential function in the establishment of diasporic Jewish communities, as a “secret bond between the Jews and the foreign soil” (Miron 2000: 39). Through the cemetery, the bond with the foreign soil is made literal. Although it does not actually provide genuine roots or a rooted existence, the grounds are transformed into a site of belonging through the deposit in them of Jewish bodily remains. In this way, the shtetl more clearly becomes a temporary home in exile.

In *Mazel* the shtetl does not just carry this foundational ambiguity; the singular character of Jewish identity in the shtetl is also challenged by Sasha’s sister, Fraydel. With her excess of imagination, her excitement, wanderings and explorations, Fraydel is regarded as different from the other shtetl inhabitants. She is accused of having “moods. This was Shulftchev’s word for all that made Fraydel like no one else. She was as different from all others as the moon is from the sun” (71). The labeling of Fraydel as different illustrates the process of “othering” within the community itself. Because of the combination of her female identity and her extravagant behavior, the girl is regarded as strange and foreign. Intelligent, creative, highly imaginative, and “in love only with what was marvelous and strange, with things too bright or too dark to live anywhere but in her mind” (128), Fraydel is eventually driven to suicide by the conflict between the strict traditional society that imposes a prearranged marriage and her creative and imaginative mind. Fraydel is the character that challenges the predetermined rules and boundaries that characterize the shtetl’s existence. In the shtetl, where only men may devote themselves to the study of Torah, female voices are silenced. Prearranged marriages and household duties relegate the Jewish woman to the periphery of religious shtetl life. By undercutting the strict rules that define gender politics, Fraydel chips away at the internal structures of the shtetl. She symbolizes the skewed gender

politics and the stifling atmosphere of the shtetl. In this way, Goldstein's novel criticizes the patriarchal domination of Jewish life in the shtetl, and in doing so, corrects a more nostalgic or idealized version of the shtetl.

Fraydel also explores and challenges the literal borders of the shtetl. The shtetl world is demarcated and delineated by strict physical and ideological borders and boundaries that assure its purity and distance from the outside world. Crossing the boundaries results in an unsettling and anxious confrontation with the outside world. The conflicts arising from this are demonstrated on both a personal level – when, for example, individual characters cross the boundaries and face outsiders – and a more general level, as the world of Judaism is clearly contrasted to the Hellenistic and Christian world. The border surrounding the shtetl is for instance exemplified by a nearby forest. Mysterious and dark, the forest holds the unknown and is an emblem of the idolatry of nature. No one except Fraydel dares to explore its mysteries. When walking near the woods, she would sometimes go “as far as the little clearing near the crossroads, where the Christian shrine stood” (67). This Christian sign is a clear demarcation that separates the Jewish neighborhood and community from the gentile world, literally and metaphorically. The environment beyond the borders is regarded as dangerous and fraught with threats. At one point, the site where the Jews normally gather for the ritual of *tashlich* becomes temporarily occupied by a group of Gypsies, who have taken this spot as a provisional site of residence. The appearance and proximity of the gypsies create a tension in which the boundaries of the community are under strain. The arrival of the group of Gypsies – “imposing their strange dark ways over the familiar ground, so that it was transformed into a foreign place, unwelcome to the locals” (100) – complicates notions of foreignness and otherness. The site near the forest becomes a place of difference and a contact zone where identities are juxtaposed and compared. This site is not a hybrid “in-between” space, but rather a space that suggests confrontation and, potentially, careful negotiation. Fraydel decides, together with Sasha, to find out more about the mysteries of the Gypsy world and she visits the encampment. She is drawn to the exoticism and unfamiliar, seemingly magical air of the Gypsies. In this scene, then, Fraydel and Sorel scrutinize and explore the borders of the community, seeking to transcend the strict demarcations of their own ethnic membership. The exploration of the spatial borders between the communities and the encounter with the Gypsies initiate a careful scanning of a different culture. In contrast to other shtetl inhabitants, the protagonists distance themselves from the Jewish community. Their situation and status has inevitably changed. The difference between insider and outsider becomes disrupted because the moment “the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. [...] Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition; her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive

outsider” (Minh-Ha 1995: 217-18). The fixed and singular identity of the shtetl and its inhabitants is subject to change and modification. Although a clear distinction is wanted between the Jewish world and the influences from the outside world, the borders separating the community from the secular world are blurred and transcended. This is the first step in the novel that leads to a notion of identity as a process that entails positioning and constant reconstruction.

The actions of Fraydel disrupt the clear-cut distinctions between men and women, and between inside and outside. In this respect, a particular tale that Fraydel tells her sisters is striking. She comes up with a story about a girl, the daughter of a wealthy man, who is betrothed to a young scholar. Fraydel describes the future bride as “neither happy nor sad, only dazed by the memory of having lived exactly this moment before” (80). The description resembles to a certain extent Fraydel’s own characterization: she is also numbed by the community’s repetitiveness. At a certain moment the *badchen*, the wedding jester, enters and begins to recite his wedding verses. But, as he continues, it becomes clear that he is familiar with every detail of the lives of the shtetl inhabitants present at the wedding. The merry occasion of the wedding becomes an uncanny event. As he moves from table to table, secrets are uncovered and flaws exposed, his tone becomes rude, and the atmosphere changes as everyone gets more uncomfortable by the minute. The *badchen* then invites the bride to dance with him, but something strange occurs: “The two dancers make no noise, but all around them the groans are piling up, the room is thick with them, as the Jews [...] see the girl taking on the face of the famous *badchen* from the city far, far away. Her eyes are dissolving into shadows of black, and her bloodless lips are giving way to the grin that rises up from behind them” (85). This unsettling story becomes an essential and recurring element in the novel when it is adapted for the stage by the Bilbul Art Theater group. Its meaning remains somewhat mysterious, as the *badchen* can be regarded as a symbol for different things. At one level, the figure can be understood as an icon of death that apprehends the bride on the moment of her wedding dance. Seen in this light, the story expresses a feminist concern that prearranged marriages lead to the downfall of the female individual. However, the same figure, with its panoptical gaze and its knowledge about the intimate details of the community’s members, can also be regarded as an adversary to the shtetl community as a whole. As a mysterious presence, the *badchen* thwarts the wedding and disrupts an occasion that marks the spirit of the community and assures its continuity. The guests, the rabbis and the dignitaries shudder at the sight of the strange visitor, and, eventually, the bride’s facial features take on the *badchen*’s looks. She becomes unrecognizable to the members of her own community. The *badchen* symbolizes an unknown, alien and hostile force that causes a rupture in the shtetl’s existence. Fraydel’s story is thus ambiguous in its meaning. Although the tale emphasizes the bleak destiny of women in the shtetl, it simultaneously depicts a profound rupture in an insular shtetl community. A deep sense of mourning is mixed with elements of critique and rejection. The story resonates in the other episodes of the novel: it becomes a play when

Sasha enters the world of theater, and it marks the description of Phoebe's Orthodox wedding. In this way, as a trace of the past and as a communal concern, Fraydel's story, and indeed her life, continues to haunt the lives of future generations as an almost uncanny, gothic presence.

### **Multiple affiliations/traces of the past**

Later on in the novel, the narrative abruptly shifts from the shtetl to the city of Warsaw. After Fraydel's suicide, Sasha and her parents leave their hometown and settle in an urban environment. The closed shtetl society with its strict boundaries is replaced by an open community that is characterized by diversity and multiplicity: "Pious Jews carrying their prayer-shawl bags under their arms, hurrying off to an early dawn minyan" are walking next to "others, dressed in modern clothes, in overcoats and fedoras. Instead of prayer-shawl bags, these men carried the first newspapers of the day, purchased at the corner kiosks that opened at the crack of dawn" (160). Whereas her parents are actually quite bewildered by the rush of modern life, Sasha acknowledges the creative aspects of the new setting and delves into the exciting possibilities that the urban environment has to offer. Sasha's involvement in the theater company initiates a movement of transformation for her. When she goes to see a play for the first time, accompanied by her aunt, the novel describes it as a "transfiguring night" (208). Sorel's participation in the theater company marks her move to the core of a reformation movement that critically analyzes and challenges the old ways of Jewish life and that stridently favors the modern world of progress and political activism. The Bilbul Art Theater, and the places its company frequents, such as the café Pripetshok, become sites of transformation and diversity. Amidst the dynamics of the energetic city, the notion of Jewish identity is also subject to change and modification. Different definitions and conceptions of Jewish identity here exist simultaneously. The Bilbul Art Theater group consists of various characters that hold different opinions with regard to Jewish identity and politics. The group is a motley crew that typifies the diversity and internal divisions of the Jewish community, consisting of atheists, Zionists, Bundists, and Yiddishists. However, each member, despite its desire to exchange the Old World values and customs for a modern life (most of the members have changed their names into more modern variants), remains closely attached to the generations that came before. The director of the group, Hershel Blau, often recounts the *mysahs* (Jewish folktales) of his father, "a *maggid*, an itinerant Chasidic preacher, who interlaced his homilies with an inexhaustible stock of parables and allegories [...]" (201-205). Through the telling of his father's stories, Hershel continues to be connected with and defined by his religious past and upbringing. Although Hershel has adopted a secular stance, his Jewish identity still endures through his Yiddish art and through a form of storytelling that underlines his roots. Likewise, Jascha Saunders, a composer and committed atheist, "retained intact the more severe aspects of the spirit of religion [...]" (201-202). Different opinions

about the importance and weight of ethnic origins and ancestral ties are manifested. The discussions among the members of the theater group reflect the contrast or oppositions between collectivity and individualism, parochialism and universalism, inclusiveness and exclusiveness. This episode in the novel illustrates the constant struggle with the inheritance of the past in the modern world of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish movement of Enlightenment.

However, despite the contrasting viewpoints and the diversification of Jewish identification in this episode, the staging of Fraydel's story of the doomed bride strikes a specific chord in the Jewish consciousness on Warsaw. The narrative touches the hearts of the other members of the theater group and becomes an instant success, propelling them to stardom. Even the critics are full of praise about the performance of "The Bridegroom". The play becomes popular overnight and even Gentiles come to see the performance, although it is suggested that they do not understand the play the way the Jewish audience does; "for the Jews in the audience, no matter how enlightened and assimilated, the story of the young bride meeting her doom on the very night of her wedding cast a long shadow of meaning" (278). The story symbolizes a specific aspect of the Jewish ethnic past that continues to define the Jewish psyche.

"The Bridegroom" indeed stirs the Jewish imagination in this novel. The play carries more than one duality: it criticizes gender politics in the shtetl, but arouses a communal consciousness in the actors and the spectators. The play conveys a sense of communal identity, but it also creates distance because of the mediated and fictional rendering of the past. On the one hand, remembrance and commemoration of the Old World is manifested through theater. The staging of Yiddish and Jewish plays is a literal performance of Jewish identity; the performance recollects the roots and the realm of origin and emphasizes the collective identity of the audiences; the spectators are again linked with their past. However, on the other hand, the element of theater also means that the world that is discursively staged remains distorted and artificial; rather than a reality, it is a mere substitute. The link with the Old World is therefore superficial, highlighting the real distance between present and past. The Old World becomes a myth that nevertheless resists true assimilation into the host environment on the part of an audience that is doubly affiliated. The people in the audience "were worldly men and women, dressed like any other citizen of Europe, and informed by Europe's culture; and yet they were unworldly, too. What they took from the world was meshed with that sensibility which was their birthright, which they could no sooner have put off than their own faces" (309). The world of the theater actually becomes a "liminal" space, a threshold between past and present, between a world determined by descent and a modern universe of consent-based changes. Here again, the clear-cut distinctions between contrasting elements are blurred and undermined.



## **The reshtetlization of America: A synthesis**

The last few chapters of the novel again take place in Lipton, New Jersey. After the episodes in the shtetl and in Warsaw, the novel focuses on a member of the third generation of American Jewish women. In Marcus Lee Hansen's famous theory, posited in his essay "The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant" (1938), "the second generation immigrant [...] forgets the cultural past in the process of becoming an American, whereas the third-generation grandson, in quest of a new identity shaped partly by disillusionment with the promises of American democracy, attempts to recover the ethnic past" (Singh et al. 1996: 3). A similar process marks the intergenerational evolution in this novel, although Phoebe's return to Orthodoxy is not inspired by disillusionment with "the promises of American democracy", but rather by the awareness of a missing link with her origins. Because Chloe decided to become a single mother, the details regarding Phoebe's biological father have always been extremely vague. Consequently, a part of Phoebe's history of origin is obscured. The question of origin, the importance of belonging to a certain collective, pervades the novel. At first, Jewish identity is defined within the context of an isolated communal environment in which a fixed and rigid sense of identity prevails. Then, in the urban setting, this singular identity is transformed into various diverging aspects of ethnic identity, ranging from secular to cultural to geographical. Eventually, in the context of Phoebe's wedding, a kind of symbiosis is reached between divergent forces: tradition and modernity, male and female, past and present, parochialism and universalism. In Phoebe's third generation existence, opposing forces come together and merge.

In contrast to her grandmother Sasha and mother Chloe, Phoebe is determined to return to the traditional and substantial notions of her heritage and ethnic identity. As a true *ba'al teshuvah*, Phoebe revives the ancient tradition, but at the same time participates in secular life through her academic profession in Princeton. She resists her grandmother's sharp and rigid rejection of a closed Jewish community and tries to incorporate the notion of such a closed community into her contemporary suburban life. While Sasha despises and rejects her Jewish past – both the site of the shtetl itself and the way of life it presented – and Chloe sees her mother's past as something mythical and unworldly, Phoebe returns to this distant world, "insisting on removing it from the level of mythology" (336). As Hansen predicted, the third generation returns to tradition and a strong ethnic identity. Hansen's prediction – that the third generation returns to ethnic and religious tradition – is here given fictional shape. Phoebe succeeds in what Schreiber has called a "replanting, rerooting, and subsequent growth" (Schreiber 1998: 275). Like the play "The Bridegroom", a tale of both loss and recovery, Phoebe's life is testimony to a past that has been annihilated and to a certain extent revives that history. In staging such a return to a shtetl-like environment, Goldstein's novel posits a return to a collective that is not only genealogically, but also spatially demarcated: the space and structure of the European shtetl is transported to the American

suburb. Temporal and spatial distances and gaps are in this way transcended, while the past structures are simultaneously subject to transformation and incorporation into contemporary existence.

Phoebe's return to tradition and to the shtetl-like environment is further emphasized by the similarities in portrayal between herself and Fraydel. Both are described in the same way, and are living in the same environment – the shtetl and the suburb are variations on a theme. When Sasha worries about Phoebe and thinks, “[a] soul without a skin, without a skin. How can I keep the world from flaying her raw?” (17), the very same words are later also used to describe Fraydel – later, in terms of narrating chronology; not, of course, narrated chronology. Phoebe's resemblance with Fraydel is made very obvious: “Phoebe is, just as Fraydel had been, small and finely boned, her hair dark and her skin pale and her face brought to a type beyond pretty by the night sky eyes” (18). Moreover, Sasha insists that Phoebe uses the name “Fraydel” as the Hebrew name on her wedding document. The resemblances between Phoebe and Fraydel more than hint at the continuing bond between and over different generations, and illuminate the diversity of female positioning within the tradition. In contrast, the disparities between them demonstrate the evolution from the closed world of the shtetl to the precarious construction of a more diverse or flexible identity. From an antagonistic relationship between Judaism and feminism, the novel evolves to a seemingly successful merger.

Furthermore, Phoebe's Orthodox identity unexpectedly contests the idea of an essential and pure religious identity. Instead, her version of Jewish identity favors flexibility and inclusiveness. Far from a stagnant and isolated community, Phoebe's hometown actually offers diversity, or that is at least the impression we are given by novel's end (and emphatically not in the opening scenes, strongly focalized through an unforgivingly critical Sasha). In an act of restaging the past, Phoebe adopts and modifies traditional values and forms and connects them with modern and feminist issues. Rather than merely recovering the tradition of the past, Phoebe creates something new and uses different elements to establish an identity that combines both notions of descent and consent. Uniting Orthodox tradition with modern life, Phoebe creates a hybrid identity in which the subject is typified, not as singular or essential, but as multiple and shifting. Rather than a fixed idea, identity is a process or a positioning. Meyers also states that Phoebe's return to the Orthodox condition does not entail a new form of establishing a ghetto. For example, at the wedding, her two bridesmaids are Cindy Chan and Shanti Chervu, and Phoebe “shares with other female subjects a sense that permeable boundaries define the diasporic homes that we make” (Meyers 2007: 70). Thus, in contrast to the shtetl community, with its strict borders, Phoebe's world is characterized by the possibility of border crossing. The movement from one realm to another is possible without losing the meaning of both worlds. The dichotomy between inside and outside is transcended and the resulting form of identification is inclusive and diverse. This view of course clashes with Sasha's belief in the powers of *mazel*, meaning unpredictability and chance. In the novel, Sasha explains the force

of mazel as “the great confounder of closed systems and their pretenders. Mazel is the imp of metaphysics” (5). The novel thus presents a tension between Phoebe’s sense of continuity and religious observance and Sasha’s defense of spiritual freedom and confusion. Towards the end of the novel, Phoebe’s return to tradition and her participation in a strict and limited existence seems to overrule Sasha’s worldview.

Several critics, however, question the success of Phoebe’s endeavor. Levinson argues that Goldstein’s novel does not make “a convincing case for the modernization or (re)constructing of Judaism or of a Jewish feminist identity” (2005: 111). She claims that, although Phoebe has found comfort in her return to tradition, this return remains fragile and precarious, and that “there is some warning that this type of return may not last through the next generation” (Levinson 2005: 118). Emphasizing the open ending of the novel, Murray Baumgarten reasons that we “are left with a conundrum, which we as readers have to resolve: is Phoebe, in reenacting that return to tradition, simply reentering the stagnant world of the *shtetl*, of Shluftchev with its puddle [...] Or has a different and new possibility come into play that might reconcile modernist city and traditional *shtetl* life? (2002: 105). However, the novel’s ending, reconciling the different parties, hints at both a positive conclusion and a hopeful beginning. At the wedding, the different stages of which are all said to be explained in a booklet for the benefit of non-Jewish visitors, Chloe “felt strangely united to all these people” (354). Sasha, who first stays “near the periphery of the room” (Ibid.), contemplates and, finally, dismisses the belief in the gradual disappearance of the Jewish people. Still experiencing feelings of anger and cynicism, Sasha is suddenly pulled up off her chair by a stranger, who shoves her to the center of the dance floor where she joins Chloe and Phoebe. They “were all dancing together, their arms linked around one another’s waists and their feet barely touching the billowing floor, as they swirled around in the circles drawn within circles within circles. And so it goes on, it goes on” (357). This scene echoes the doomed dancing scene in Fraydel’s story of the bridegroom, but emphatically without the sense of doom. Nonetheless, the connection and continuation between the different generations is highlighted. The image of the circles signals the continuity of intergenerational ties and of common ethnic tradition. The novel has an open ending that stresses the process of identification and settlement, rather than presenting a clear-cut resolution or solution. This might exactly be the point of Goldstein’s novel: as this work has continuously focused on movement, change and the modification of traditional Jewish identity, the end of this literary text similarly portrays a subsequent phase in the process of change and renewal. The open ending holds the potential of either a continuance of Phoebe’s construction or the temporary nature of this creation. By emphasizing this uncertain duality, Goldstein’s novel highlights the very existence of such choices – in sharp contrast to notions of predestination or determinism.

## Conclusion

The novel presents a tension between the belief in a primordial, inherited and fixed identity, on the one hand, and a constructed, voluntary identity, on the other hand. As the female subject within the Jewish community challenges the patriarchal domination of Judaism, the Jewish communities confront the world outside its borders. Different contact zones come into existence: characterized by confrontation (shtetl inhabitants encountering the Gypsy community), by multiplicity and cosmopolitanism (the different strands of Jewish thought in the urban environment), and finally, by a fusion of different, seemingly contrasting systems (Phoebe's existence in Lipton). In all these instances, the process of hybridization, the constant dialogue between self and other, is at work. Also, of course, *within* the Jewish community, as the female and male voices are in flux as well. The sense of identity in this novel defies a purely center/margin discourse and goes beyond the notion of Center and Diaspora, yet retains diaspora characteristics such as mobility, the link with a past and past home, and the idea of a collective. The inherited or primordial aspect of identity is still legitimate – illustrated in this novel through the continued influence of the narratives of the past – but Jewish identity is not presented as a fixed idea, or a permanent given. Rather, the work presents identity as flexible, productive, and constantly ambivalent, both integrating elements from a certain moment in time and incorporating aspects from the past. Structurally, thematically, and formally, Goldstein's novel embodies the process of hybridization, yet without rendering Jewish identity obsolete, but instead emphasizing its constant reinvention and reassessment.

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