

# “The Hope for the Better”: Immigrants in Jewish American Literature

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**The Steerage**, 1907 Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946)  
Photogravure on vellum; 12 11/16 x 10 3/16 in. (32.2 x 25.8 cm)  
Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1933 (33.43.419)

It is only through an act of forced immigration that the Jewish people can become a nation. God tells Abram: ““Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing”” (Genesis 12: 1-2). While this might be the first immigration story in Jewish literature, it certainly isn’t the last. Some of the most iconic Jewish poems and prayers are immersed in migration stories, either by divine edict or by the evil decree of ancient rulers. In the twelfth century, for example, living in Spain, Yehudah Halevi pens his most iconic poem, a lyric suffused with the split reality of the life of an immigrant. As Jonathan Rosen says in his foreword to a collection of Halevi’s poems that was recently published, “Halevi was born in Spain at the height of its Golden Age, but though he was celebrated as a master of the poetic forms of this most poetic era, enjoying wealth and fame as a poet, physician, and sage, in 1140, then in his late sixties, he turned his back on Spain and sailed for Crusader-ruled Palestine” (1). Here is Halevi’s poem, “My heart is in the East”:

My heart is in the East, and I am at the ends of the West;  
How can I taste what I eat and how could it be pleasing to me?  
How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet  
Zion lies beneath the fetter of Edom, and I am in the chains of Arabia?  
It would be easy for me to leave all the bounty of Spain—  
As it is precious for me to behold the dust of the desolate  
sanctuary. (21)

This idea of being split in two—of being physically in one place while dreaming of another—is deeply connected to the Jewish experience.

When discussing Jewish exile and immigration there are a number of possible topics to consider: what constitutes a homeland (and leaving a homeland) for people who have spent millennia being uprooted from one country after another? Is home a physical place or is it a shared culture? Is it adherence to a shared set of beliefs? For those without land, can a language constitute a home for the displaced and uprooted? For generations of Jewish people, the

Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and its thousands of commentaries and holy texts, constituted a portable homeland for a people dispersed throughout the nations of the world.

Towards the beginning of his Holocaust memoir, Italian Jewish writer and chemist Primo Levi watches the mourning rituals of a group of Jews from Tripoli who had moved to Italy and were now about to be transported by cattle car to Auschwitz. They all gather together to light *yahrzeit*<sup>1</sup> candles for themselves: “We collected in a group outside their door and we experienced within ourselves a grief that was new for us, the ancient grief of the people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus which is renewed every century” (16).

This duality and split has continued to be a hallmark of the literature that immigrants and the children of immigrants created in America. It is, therefore, fitting that when we speak of American immigration literature we think immediately of the Jewish experience on these “alien shores.” Between the years of 1881 and 1924, when the United States passed anti-immigrant legislation, over two million Jews emigrated from the pale of settlement in Europe to the “*goldena medina*,”<sup>2</sup> to the promised land of America. Writers like Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska, Abraham Cahan, and Henry Roth all made immigration their theme and the source of their art. Jewish American immigrant writers dramatized the tremendous promise of the new world; their novels and memoirs highlight the relief of newly-arrived people who have left behind the seemingly endless discrimination and anti-Semitism of life in Europe, a life often defined by violence and pogroms. Yet these narratives, even while giving voice to the great promise of America, also concurrently dramatize the crushingly difficult lives the immigrants faced upon re-settling in America. Most of the Jewish immigrants, who made the journey in the steerage compartment of steamships, settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan—a neighborhood composed of the poorest tenement buildings in NYC that by the 1890s was swarming with waves of Italian American, Irish American, and Jewish American immigrants all competing for air and light in a neighborhood that was the most densely populated place on Earth.

Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant himself, attempted to educate the upper- and middle-classes about the horrors of the Lower East Side and the plight of immigrants in America. In 1890, he published his most well-known book of essays and photographs, *How the Other Half Lives*, and in his chapter titled “Jewtown,” he describes the Jewish section of the Lower East Side:

The tenements grow taller, and the gaps in their ranks close up rapidly as we cross the Bowery and, leaving Chinatown and the Italians behind, invade the Hebrew quarter. . . . So thoroughly has the chosen people crowded out the Gentiles in the Tenth Ward that, when the great Jewish holidays come around every year, the public schools in the district have practically to close up. Of their thousands of pupils scarce a handful come to school. Nor is there any suspicion that the rest are playing hookey. They stay honestly home to celebrate. There is no mistaking it: we are in Jewtown. It is said that nowhere in the world are so many people crowded together on a square mile as here. The average five-story tenement adds a story or two to its stature in Ludlow Street and an extra building on the rear lot, and yet the sign “To Let” is the rarest of all there. Here is one seven stories high. The sanitary policeman whose beat this is will tell you that it contains thirty-six families, but the term has a widely different meaning here and on the avenues. In this house, where a case of small-pox was reported, there were fifty-eight babies and thirty-eight children that were over five years of age. In Essex Street two small rooms in a six-story tenement were made to hold a “family” of father and mother, twelve children and six boarders. The boarder plays as important a part in the domestic economy of Jewtown as the lodger in the Mulberry Street Bend. These are samples of the packing of the population that has run up the record here to the rate of three hundred and thirty thousand per square mile. The densest crowding of Old London, I pointed out before, never got beyond a hundred and seventy-five thousand. Even the alley is crowded out. Through dark hallways and filthy cellars, crowded, as is every foot of the street, with dirty children, the settlements in the rear are reached. . . . Life here means the hardest kind of work almost from the cradle. The world as a debtor has no credit in Jewtown. Its promise to pay wouldn’t buy one of the old hats that are hawked about Hester Street, unless

backed by security representing labor done at lowest market rates.  
(Riis 128-129)

The very best of the immigrant writers make an attempt to balance the great promise of America, a land built upon founding documents guaranteeing equality and liberty for all, with the harsh reality of a poverty-laden existence filled with back-breaking manual labor and the anguish of dislocation, which defined the immigrant experience for so many.

Yet for the immigrant writer, these challenges are balanced by unique aesthetic possibilities. As Eva Hoffman, a Jewish writer who as a young girl emigrated from Poland in 1959 to Vancouver, British Columbia, suggests:

For the immigrant writer the process of coming to know a new world involves the attempt to imagine and to enter into other subjectivities, and the subjectivity of another language. At the same time, literature more than perhaps any other form of human activity can give us insight into other subjectivities, fates, and lives. (246)

So, given the many nationalities that came to America in great numbers, why is it that we turn to the Jewish American experience as somehow being representative of the larger multi-ethnic group that collectively make up “the immigrant class”? The Statue of Liberty might provide us with an answer.

When the Statue of Liberty rose in New York harbor, it was meant as a symbol of nationalism. Yet a few years later, once the immortal words of Emma Lazarus, a Jewish American poet and descendent of immigrants to America, wrote her poem “The New Colossus,” and once those words were inscribed on the base of “Lady Liberty,” the public began to connect the Statue of Liberty with immigration and, more specifically, with Jewish American immigration.



A small boy shows his parents the Statue of Liberty from Ellis Island U.S. immigration station in New York Harbor. [ca. 1930], photographic print. Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ds-03375 (digital file from original item) LC-USZ62-50904 (b&w film copy neg.)

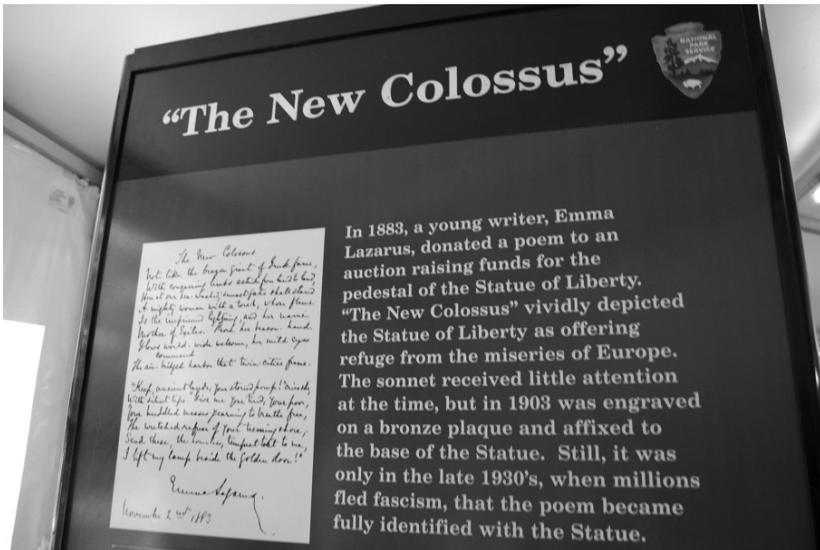


Photo by Ezra Cappell

Given its iconic status in the field of Jewish immigration we will quote Lazarus's sonnet in its entirety:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Following Emma Lazarus's lead, many Jewish immigrant writers wrote of their joy at finding America and being able to finally breathe free in a country that didn't persecute them simply for being born Jewish. Here is Mary Antin writing in her bestselling autobiography, *The Promised Land*:

In after years, when I passed as an American among Americans, if I was suddenly made aware of the past that lay forgotten,—if a letter from Russia, or a paragraph in the newspaper, or a conversation overheard in the street-car, suddenly reminded me of what I might have been,—I thought it miracle enough that I, Mashke, the granddaughter of Raphael the Russian, born to a humble destiny, should be at home in an American metropolis, be free to fashion my own life, and should dream my dreams in English phrases. But in the beginning my admiration was spent on more concrete embodiments of the splendors of America; such as fine houses, gay shops, electric engines and apparatus, public buildings, illuminations, and parades. My early letters to my Russian friends were filled with boastful descriptions of these glories of my new country. No native citizen of Chelsea took such pride and delight in its institutions as I did. It required no fife and drum corps, no Fourth of July procession, to set me tingling with

patriotism. Even the common agents and instruments of municipal life, such as the letter carrier and the fire engine, I regarded with a measure of respect. I know what I thought of people who said that Chelsea was a very small, dull, unaspiring town, with no discernible excuse for a separate name or existence. (156)

Despite this beautiful image of a beacon in New York harbor welcoming immigrants, the actual immigrant story varied considerably from the version often portrayed in prose and poetry. Therefore, by the 1930s, many Jewish immigrant writers described the immigrant experience in decidedly darker tones. In his 1934 modernist masterpiece, *Call it Sleep*, Henry Roth writes of the moment the immigrant family gains their first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty:

The spinning disk of the late-afternoon sun slanted behind her, and to those on board who gazed, her features were charred with shadow, her depths exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plane. Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light—the blackened hilt of a broken sword. Liberty. The child and his mother stared again at the massive figure in wonder. (14)

The early generation of immigrant writers attempted to capture the striving of the Jews who managed to make it over to America. An exchange between two recent Jewish immigrants in Anzia Yezierska's short story "Hunger" exemplifies this yearning and the desire to better oneself, a major theme of Yezierska's stories, as well as the work of many other Jewish American immigrant writers. In this scene, Shenah Pessah is out on a date with her sweatshop co-worker Sam Arkin:

Through streets growing black with swarming crowds of toil-released workers they made their way. Sam Arkin's thick hand rested with a lightness new to him upon the little arm tucked under his. The haggling pushcart peddlers, the newsboys screaming, "Tageblatt, Abenblatt,

Herold,” the roaring noises of the elevated trains resounding the paean of joy swelling his heart.

“America was good to me, but I never guessed how good till now.” The words were out before he knew it. “Tell me only, what pulled you to this country?”

“What pulls anybody here? The hope for the better. People who got it good in the old world don’t hunger for the new.” (Yeziarska 25)

This scene gives readers not just a vivid description of the yearning for a better life that, beneath the glow of the Statue of Liberty’s torch, brought many millions of Jewish immigrants to the shores of the new world. Yeziarska also gives her readers a visceral feel for the noise, confusion, and crowded streets of the turn-of-the-century Lower East Side.

This sweatshop world of garment workers is powerfully brought to life in an Abraham Cahan short story, “A Sweatshop Romance.” In this story, Cahan describes the backbreaking work that most of the new immigrants experience. They may “hunger for the new,” but if there is anything that Jewish American immigrant literature underscores for its readers, it is that the rewards of the new world were hard-won and often not experienced until the next generation, the second generation of immigrants in America who were able to rise out of the ghetto and make a better life for themselves. In the following passage, Abraham Cahan describes the typical day of a Jewish American immigrant sweatshop worker:

Lippman’s was a task shop, and according to the signification which the term has in the political economy of the sweating world, his operator, baster, and finisher, while nominally engaged at so much a week, were in reality paid by the piece, the economical week being determined by a stipulated quantity of made-up coats rather than by a fixed number of the earth’s revolutions around its axis; for the sweatshop day will not coincide with the solar day unless a given amount of work be accomplished in its course. (191)

What this meant was that most of the Jewish American immigrant workers in the sweatshops (as well as the thousands of Irish American

and Italian American immigrant workers who toiled alongside them) routinely worked sixteen-hour days to make their daily quota of garment pieces. This hardly constituted “the good life” or “the hope for better” that inspired millions of immigrants to, following the biblical patriarch Abram’s lead, “lech l’cha,” to go forth and find a new life. Yet despite the many obstacles they encountered, these immigrants persevered, and their sweat and labor created many unimaginable opportunities for the next generation of Jewish Americans. This second generation was written about by postwar Jewish American writers: Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth, who represented a great flowering of Jewish American letters.

Writing about that second generation of Jewish writers, historian and literary critic Irving Howe famously opined that once the generation of immigrant writers and their children passed, Jewish American literature as a genre would wither and die. In 1977, Irving Howe edited an anthology called *Jewish-American Stories*. In his introductory remarks, Howe worried about the future of Jewish writing in America, a future without the benefit of its great sustaining theme: immigration. Howe wrote: “My own view is that American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources, a thinning-out of materials and memories” (16). For Howe, Jewish literature took place on the streets and in the tenements of the Lower East Side.

Yet here we are forty years after Howe’s pronouncement and, rather unpredictably, a new group of Jewish immigrants have re-invigorated the field of Jewish American literature. Over the past few decades these many Jewish immigrants have come over to the US from Russia and the former Soviet Republics. Writers like Gary Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, Boris Fishman, and David Bezmozgis (Jewish Canadian), to name just a few, have been creating new stories of Jewish immigration and writing a new chapter to the immigrant experience in Jewish American fiction.

At the outset of his 2006 novel *Absurdistan*, Gary Shteyngart reverses the paradigmatic Jewish American immigration tale.

Shteyngart's hero Misha Vainberg has been living in America for many years; however, during a trip back to Russia to attend his father's funeral, he ends up stuck in bureaucratic limbo after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Throughout the novel, Vainberg remains exiled in his ancestral homeland of Russia. Shteyngart's hero does not attempt to make it "to" America like so many of Shalom Aleichem's characters, nor is he concerned with making it "in" America as so many of Abraham Cahan's characters are; rather, Shteyngart ironically tropes on this theme, focusing on Vainberg's attempt to re-integrate himself, to make it "back" into a post-9/11 America.

As a hip-hopping millionaire in a post-Soviet-era St. Petersburg, all Misha Vainberg wants is for the American embassy officials to allow him to return to the pre-9/11 idyll of New York City's cultural melting pot that he left behind when he went back to St. Petersburg to attend his murdered father's funeral. Therefore, unlike the immigrants dreaming of the *goldena medina* in early twentieth-century Jewish American fiction, Shteyngart's Vainberg—having been schooled in a top US liberal arts university, "Accidental College," modeled on Shteyngart's own undergraduate institution of Oberlin—is fully cognizant of what he has been deprived of in the 9/11 attacks: the great promise of American freedom and the opportunity to pursue his happiness and his hip-hop dreams and desires, all unimaginable pursuits in twenty-first-century Russia, where an ascendant anti-Semitism still persecutes Vainberg at every opportunity. Not only is Vainberg's mother's grave vandalized by marauding neo-Nazis, in several memorable scenes Shteyngart's hero suffers through vicious anti-Semitic assaults. Vainberg never reaches his adopted New York City homeland within the novel; instead there is an endless deferral of this mythical Eden. As a result, the actual New York City becomes replaced by an imaginative act, a reimagining of a fictional city and invented homeland. To this new mode of ironic Jewish American immigration novels, we could add Michael Chabon's 2007 novel *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, which tells the story of Jews who have emigrated from Europe to Alaska once America has helped save them from the horrors of the

Holocaust—help, which in cold, hard, and brutal reality, was never forthcoming to the European Jews.

There is yet another group of recent Jewish American writers who are re-inventing and expanding our conception of an immigration story. Writers like Shulem Deen, Leah Vincent, Deborah Feldman, Shalom Auslander, and Leah Lax have been called *Off the Derech* (OTD), which literally means “off the path.” The term refers to people who no longer follow the “derech,” the life path, which according to rabbinic authority is the only legal and moral way to live one’s life. Many individuals born into ultra-Orthodox communities who lose their faith and no longer adhere to the many strict communal rules and customs either end up leaving on their own or are forced to leave their birth communities. Usually this is a painful and bewildering rupture, as “OTD” people are cut off from their families and forced to remake their lives on the “outside” in the secular world.

Over the past few decades, many of these “OTD” individuals have written memoirs and novels dealing with their experiences of leaving the ultra-Orthodox communities of their birth for a far more bewilderingly modern existence in the outside world<sup>3</sup>. Whereas previous Jewish immigrants traveled for weeks in steerage over thousands of treacherous nautical miles in their journey from the Old World of Europe to the shores of America, many of these OTD individuals are physically just a short subway ride away on the 4 train from their ultra-Orthodox birth communities in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, for example, to the East Village in Manhattan. Although the physical space is not nearly as distant to travel for this new group of writers, the cultural and linguistic displacement can be even vaster than the oceans crossed by their immigrant ancestors generations ago. These OTD narratives, I believe, can be viewed as a new iteration of the Jewish immigrant experience in America.

We see this immigration motif quite clearly in Leah Lax’s OTD memoir, *Uncovered: How I Left my Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home*: such is the seemingly unbridgeable space between her Hasidic community and the secular world of America that she feels completely like an immigrant. She uses many of the same tropes of

bewilderment we find in the first-generation immigrant writing of Abraham Cahan or Henry Roth. Lax, despite being raised her entire life in America, with her limited English proficiency, finds herself unable to make sense of the conversations she overhears at school. In a candid moment in her memoir, Lax discovers that she is just like the millions of Jewish immigrants who, a century earlier, came over in steerage from the old country.

I'm changing in other ways. Maybe it's reading all those books, each with a different standpoint and philosophy, each with a different heart, forming in my mind a new collection of voices that aren't a Group in lockstep. Maybe it's all the time I'm spending outside of Hasidic land in heady academic freedom. I don't know. But now I can see that religious life has filled me with grandiose convictions, made me believe I knew God's words and thoughts and that I truly changed the world with the strike of a match or the proper tying of shoes. Now I just feel small and ineffective. Is that what the world out there is? No clear path—just an enormous jumble of conflicting beliefs, events, personalities, desires—and nothing I do will change it? I'll die, a blip, and leave no mark at all. And it doesn't matter how I tie my shoes.

Yet, after all these years in black and white, I still don't know what color is.

Although I can see paradox and irony everywhere I turn, I'm ill prepared to deal with it. In the secular world, I'm a child, or a new immigrant, without insight or reference points.

In class and in the student lounge, I sidle up to conversations, but they talk about movies and television shows and politics and I don't know most of what they're talking about. Students meet and hang out in bars and coffee shops and restaurants, where I wouldn't know how to order or how to figure a tax and a tip. (Lax 283)

In this powerful new group of *Off the Derech* memoirs and narratives, we see that the great theme of the immigrant experience has once again moved to the forefront of Jewish American writing. Although back in the 1970s Irving Howe tolled the death knell for Jewish American literature, we see how this topic of immigration still suffuses and enlivens a new generation of Jewish writers, to

the delight of a new generation of readers discovering the joys and perils of being transplanted from one world and culture into the vast, swirling American present. Far from being closed, the topic of immigration continues to enliven Jewish American literature well into the twenty-first century and beyond. United States Poet Laureate Philip Levine, in his poem “The Mercy” (1999), shows the numerous ways that late twentieth century and contemporary Jewish American writers are reinventing and reimagining the immigration motif for a new audience.

The poem begins with Levine telling the story of his mother’s harrowing journey from the old country to America and his efforts, many decades later, at researching and discovering as many details as he can about his mother’s trip and the ship that brought her over to the new world. Here are the opening lines of the poem:

The ship that took my mother to Ellis Island  
Eighty-three years ago was named “The Mercy.”  
She remembers trying to eat a banana  
without first peeling it and seeing her first orange  
in the hands of a young Scot, a seaman  
who gave her a bite and wiped her mouth for her  
with a red bandana and taught her the word,  
“orange,” saying it patiently over and over. (1-8)

The poem begins by dramatizing the deprivation and poverty faced by Jews in the shtetls of Europe. Levine’s mother had apparently, at the age of nine, never seen a banana or an orange before. Although she is undertaking this great journey all by herself, at least Levine’s mother has the help and generosity of another person, “a young Scot” (5) who gives her a taste of the promise of the new world.

Yet much like the immigrant experience in America, the voyage quickly turns dark, and smallpox rages among the passengers in steerage. Levine reports that while researching his mother’s story at the New York Public Library, he discovers that disease was so rampant the ship was forced to sit in quarantine for a full month offshore before the passengers were allowed to disembark.

Through his powerful conclusion to the poem, Levine takes the Jewish immigrant experience in new directions, reinventing the form. Levine writes that while his mother's ship sat in quarantine, other ships continued to arrive, each filled with immigrants from around the world seeking a new, better life. According to Levine, the list of ships arriving in America "goes on for pages" (28) as "November gives/ way to winter, the sea pounds this alien shore" (28-29).

After alluding to Psalm 137 with the line "this alien shore," Levine connects his mother's story of traveling alone across America, to the story of other, different ethnic immigrant groups and their difficult experiences in the new world. Levine tells his readers about Italian miners from Piemonte, who: "dig / under towns in western Pennsylvania / only to rediscover the same nightmare / they left at home" (30-33).

Once Levine shows his readers the life of backbreaking and soul-crushing manual labor that awaits so many of the new immigrants to these "alien shores," he concludes with that moment of mercy with which he began his poem:

A nine-year-old girl travels  
all night by train with one suitcase and an orange.  
She learns that mercy is something you can eat  
again and again while the juice spills over  
your chin, you can wipe it away with the back  
of your hands and you can never get enough. (33-38)

We see Philip Levine meditating in his poem not just on his Jewish mother's difficult passage to America, but, unlike the earlier generation of Jewish American immigrant writers, he takes her story a step further and connects her experience of dislocation and fear, but also of kindness and mercy, to the experience of other ethnic groups who also toiled on these "alien shores," a reference to Psalm 137. This Psalm tells an earlier story of Jewish forced migration into their long and difficult exile:

Psalm 137 King James Version (KJV)

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
- 2 We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
- 3 For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
- 4 How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?
- 5 If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.
- 6 If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.
- 7 Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.
- 8 O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.
- 9 Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

Psalm 137 tells the story of the Jews being taken into exile in Babylon after the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the holy temple. As the Jews were being taken into captivity, their captors, wanting to make sport of their slaves, demanded that they sing them a song. This cruelty elicited one of the most famous retorts in all of Hebrew literature: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (l. 4). The Jewish survivors refused a song for their captors and, hanging their harps on the willow trees, they vowed to always raise the memory of the destruction of Jerusalem even above their highest joy.

In his poem, "The Mercy," Levine glosses this psalm with his reference to "alien shores," yet rather than perpetuate this endless cycle of retributive violence, Levine ironically reverses this message. In his poem, Levine suggests that with a little bit of mercy (sometimes all it takes is an orange), immigrants might just make it in America after all.

In Psalm 137, the speaker wishes to visit upon the captors what they had done during the destruction of Jerusalem. The poet cries: "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones" (9). In Levine's poem, instead of horrific violence, dashing

a young girl's head against the rocks, there is the merciful offer of a gift, a hope-inducing orange. In Levine's immigration narrative, people from vastly different ethnicities and religious backgrounds help one another, supporting one another through compassion and mercy. Just like violence will always beget more counter-violence, mercy, too, will beget ever more goodness—and Levine suggests that immigrants, just like the rest of us, can never truly have enough mercy and generosity.

Levine imagines the Jewish American immigrant experience as a template upon which to view the suffering and difficulties of other ethnic groups as well: his mother's story is interwoven with the tale of Italian American miners from Piemonte who, instead of finding "hope for the better" as Anzia Yezierska's characters do, "rediscover the same nightmare they left at home" (30-33). It is this cycle of unending violence that Levine suggests is the flipside of American mercy and freedom. For Emma Lazarus, the Statue of Liberty represents the dream and promise of a new, better life for the millions of immigrants streaming beneath her raised torch, but Philip Levine's poem "The Mercy" suggests that all too often these immigrants will awake to the difficult reality of poverty and unending physical labor in the new land of America.

Levine's paradox, the great promise of America versus the reality as experienced by the vast majority of new immigrants to this land, is at the heart of the Jewish American literary experience in the twentieth century, and, as we have seen, it still animates much of Jewish literary production today. Despite this reality, the title of Levine's poem leaves readers with the salient image of one vulnerable person, a young Scotsman, showing mercy to another even more vulnerable Jewish immigrant—a nine-year old girl, all alone on her way to a new world where she did not speak the language and knew almost no one. Levine's poem stridently informs us that if immigrants are going to succeed in the new world, they must rely upon one another and not wait for governmental or institutional compassion or support.

Levine, in his *fin de siècle* poem of immigration, complicates the Jewish American experience by connecting it powerfully to

another equally compelling story of immigration and hardship, the story of coal miners from Piemonte. Unlike Irving Howe, who felt that with the death of the immigrant generation, Jewish American literature had passed its “high water mark,” Levine’s poem, recent Russian Jewish tales of immigration, and the Off the Derech narratives considered earlier, remind us that “the past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Faulkner 73). Immigration narratives continue to inspire new ways of thinking and writing about the continuing saga of the Jewish experience in America.

## Notes

1. A *yahrzeit* candle is a memorial candle that is lit in memory of the dead.
2. The phrase *goldena medina* literally means “the golden land” or “the golden state.” Brochures advertising steamship passage to the new world often exaggerated the wealth of America, claiming the US was so rich that its streets were paved with gold.
3. Keeping with our theme of “the hope for the better,” one tool being used to help OTD individuals is a series of videos titled “It Gets Besser.” *Besser* is the Yiddish word for “better,” and the group is dedicated to instilling hope and belief in recent “immigrants” from ultra-Orthodox communities that, over time once they acclimate to their new world, life will indeed get better. The “It Gets Besser” videos feature “before” and “after” pictures of OTD individuals, showing them first as ultra-Orthodox people and then wearing secular garb.

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