

Malamud's *The Assistant*: A Return to Jewishness? A Note on the Text

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If Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) is a defiant outcry against everything Jewish, Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957) has obtained a reputation as a literary affirmation of Jewishness. Frank Alpine's conversion to Judaism, an event which closes *The Assistant*, has become a symbol of the return to the roots, as it were, in at least one of the prominent Jewish-American writers in the postwar period. However, it is not clear that *The Assistant* is an example of a return to Jewish orthodoxies. Indeed, its advocacy of Jewish values tends to raise more questions than it answers. A great deal of critical comment has been devoted to this particular issue, and the positions range from unquestioning acceptance of the Jewish message of the book to a refusal to accept either Morris Bober as a representative Jew or the validity of Frank's conversion. In the first view, the conversion of the Italian-Catholic Alpine is celebrated as a transformation from "uncircumcised Dog!," from uncircumcised beast, to circumcised Jew, the 'man of stern morality.'" Similarly, it is said that "Morris Bober is the Jew more imperatively than he is Morris Bober. He is constantly identified in his Jewishness."¹ In the second interpretation it is pointed out that Morris's Jewishness cannot be Talmudic, since he eats ham, and Frank is regarded as one who will probably make a poor Jew, converting to "a Judaism he does not understand and which cannot possibly sustain him."²

Both of these approaches miss the point. It is true that the Jewish faith of either Morris or Frank leaves much to be desired from a traditional standpoint. Instead, Jewishness in *The Assistant* is one manifestation of a general moral law to which Frank commits himself after many failures and false starts. Understandably, this approach of Malamud's has been perceived by some as a threat to Jewish identity: "What Malamud has done explicitly throughout his work is widen the definition of 'Jew' to the point of meaninglessness . . . In fact his Jew may become indistinguishable from the non-Jew as he becomes homogenized in a larger, non-Jewish world."³

The critics who sense a danger of apostasy in *The Assistant* are reading it more or less correctly. For all of its Jewish characters, Yiddish speech patterns, and general Jewish atmosphere, the novel is somehow subversive in matters of doctrine. It is not just that Morris eats ham; he and his family never go to the synagogue, celebrate the Sabbath, or relate themselves to Jewish religion or customs in any way.

Still, the fact remains that the novel does emphasize and advocate Jewishness; unlike *Portnoy's Complaint*, and more strongly than Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), it can be said to reaffirm certain ethnic traits. The question is what kind of Jewishness the author has in

¹ William Freedman, "From Bernard Malamud, with Discipline and with Love," in *Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1975) 165; and Marcus Klein, *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century* (Chicago: World Publishing Company, rpt. 1964), 273.

² Sanford Pinsker, "Bernard Malamud's Ironic Heroes," in *Bernard Malamud: A Collection* 53.

³ Leslie Field, "Bernard Malamud and the Marginal Jew," in *The Fiction of Bernard Malamud*, eds. Richard Astro and Jackson B. Benson (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1977) 109.

mind. It seems that in this work he has created his own version, an amalgam of Jewish, Christian, and American attitudes. In questions of assimilation or separatism, Malamud and Bellow have preferred to work out a compromise. Herzog is a secularized American intellectual, but he is also attached to the immigrant roots of his childhood and is a preserver of Jewish family feelings. Morris is the archetypal Jew in many of his attitudes, but he is not quite an exile in the American diaspora. He is like most immigrants or newcomers, whose main goal was to improve their lot. He has failed to make his store profitable, and he laments the harshness of conditions in America. But he does not pine for a Jewish past or mourn lost pieties. He is a Jew, psychologically speaking, demanding sacrifices from himself and steeling himself for continued misfortune, but he is also very tolerant in matters of creed.

Malamud's fictional heroes are Jewish in their sensibilities but universally valid as ethnic symbols. The author has explained his well-known statement that "all men are Jews" in the following way: "I think it is an understandable statement and a metaphoric way of indicating how history, sooner or later treats all men."⁴ Malamud seems to be more concerned with the factors that unite men in a common destiny than those aspects of an ethnic or religious nature which tend to set individuals as well as groups apart from each other. Apparently he believes that these latter, cultural differences are less important than the fact that all men must endure suffering and are in need of support from each other. The ethic of love for one's neighbor is perhaps the most universal of moral principles and is expressed both in the New and Old Testament and in other religions and philosophies.

When Frank Alpine appears in Morris's store, he is driven by remorse for having joined his acquaintance Ward Minogue in robbing Morris and having been unable to prevent Ward from knocking the grocer down with his gun. The close relationship between Morris and Frank which ensues is in itself a symbol of the meeting of religions and cultures that is an important concern in the novel. Frank wants to do penance for his sins by helping Morris in the store without pay. He also has other motivations, some of which are contradictory. He becomes attached to Helen, the grocer's daughter, but also dreams of leading a monk's life, like that of St. Francis, and he is desperately in search of a meaning and purpose in his life, a place to stay and something to do. The store becomes the answer to these needs. Morris resists Frank in the beginning, but then accepts his presence and becomes a kind of substitute father for the young Italian. Frank replaces, in a sense, the son that Morris has lost, and this man, a Gentile or "goy", is the first person outside of his family that Morris involves himself with in some depth. Their meeting or union suggests the strong emphasis in the novel upon that which unites, the moral precepts and sensibilities which are a common legacy of both Judaism and Christianity. Morris never tries to convert Frank; he has a sense of his Jewish identity, but it is entirely without the proselytizing element.

Frank and Morris are hardly theologians, but they feel bound by the same principles of charity and self-sacrifice. Obviously, Frank finds it much more difficult than Morris to live up to his own principles; he is, after all, a drifter and a thief who is just beginning to realize that the teachings of St. Francis really have a meaning for him and his life. Throughout the novel he struggles with his unlawful and destructive impulses. His main problem is how to learn to control himself. He steals from the cash register, peeps at Helen in her bath, and finally takes her by force in a park after saving her from being raped by Ward Minogue. But his remorse and sense of wrongdoing increase, and he is well on his way to giving up his former habits at the end of the novel. In this case the moral law turns out to be stronger than the urges and demands of the self.

Frank also tries to find out what Jewishness really consists of, seeing that he is so fascinated by it. He asks Morris, who replies that to be a Jew means obeying "the Torah,"

⁴ Leslie and Joyce Field, "An Interview with Bernard Malamud," in *Bernard Malamud: A Collection* 11.

"the Law," which he defines as "to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people." Frank points out that "other religions have those ideas, too," and questions the meaning of Jewish suffering. Morris argues that Jews suffer "because they are Jews," adding that "if a Jew don't suffer for the Law, he will suffer for nothing."⁵ In other words, the Jews suffer because they are more strongly committed to their system of morality than others. It is harder to be virtuous than the opposite, as Frank discovers during his struggle to bring himself to confess to Morris that he has been one of the robbers. When Morris tells Frank that "I suffer for you," and then "I mean you suffer for me" (99-100), this is his illustration of the workings of the law he is referring to. Man, insofar as he feels bound by the commandment to love one's neighbor, will experience the pain of self-abnegation.

Thus, Jewishness is identified with a general moral norm, and Frank finds that this definition brings the Jews and what they stand for much closer to him. He has felt repelled by them before, by what he has perceived as their strangeness, but his discovery that they are committed to the same basic moral doctrines as others has a reassuring effect on him. It is the attempt to establish any kind of religious superiority, or monopoly, in matters of faith and doctrine, which separates ethnic groups, and indeed peoples, and creates hostility both among Jews and non-Jews. At Morris's funeral, the rabbi preaches a sermon that echoes the deceased's own ideas: "There are many ways to be a Jew . . . he was true to the spirit of our life--to want for others that which he also wants for himself" (180).

This influence of what can be called the common moral ground also operates in the relationship between Frank and Helen. Falling in love with him, after a period of hesitation, she realizes that this feeling is far more important than the fact that he is not Jewish. She thought that this was "the greatest barrier" (105), but she is beginning to regard love and sympathy between different people as a value surpassing any other loyalty: "How could anything be more important but love and fulfillment? . . . was it more important to insist a man's religious beliefs be exactly hers (if it was a question of religion), or that the two of them have in common ideals, a desire to keep love in their lives, and to preserve in every possible way what was best in themselves? The less difference among people, the better; thus she settled it for herself yet was dissatisfied for those for whom she hadn't settled it" (105-06).

Morris's Jewish morality is an example among others of an ethical imperative that can be found also in the teachings of St. Francis, Frank's original spiritual example. In the light of this one might think it unnecessary for Frank to let himself be circumcised and become a Jew. However, it is only through his long, spiritual apprenticeship to Morris that Frank obtains a knowledge of what it really means to suffer and live for someone or something other than oneself. Frank becomes a Jew because his "teacher" happens to be one and thus clothes his message in terms that he knows. The implication is that Frank could have converted to any religion or system of values provided he had found the same inspiration in his model as he found in Morris Bober. In his household he finds charity and love, and it must seem to him that this is what Jewishness essentially amounts to. When Helen tells him that he has to learn discipline, he first rejects the idea, "but then, to his surprise, the idea seized him. He thought of himself as disciplined, then wished he were" (111). His conversion must be seen in the light of his own point of view and his understanding of the situation. Then it becomes highly intelligible instead of unconvincing.⁶ It may appear so

⁵ Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957) 99. All quotations are from this edition.

⁶ See Earl Rovit, "The Jewish Literary Tradition," in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, eds. Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York University Press, 1970) 9.

if one expects a highly conscious, wide-ranging intellectual reorientation and change in one's system of belief, but there is no evidence that Frank functions in such a manner or on such a level. He wants to live like a Jew, as defined by himself, because his experiences in the house of Morris Bober have been more important to him than anything else in his whole life.