

Portnoy, the American Jew in Israel

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Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967) focuses on the problem of the double identity of American Jews. In search of a new perspective on his Jewish-American identity, the protagonist, Alexander Portnoy, who is also the narrator, travels to Israel. Although Portnoy's stay in Israel takes up only a small portion of the novel, it is a turning point for the protagonist's sense of self. Israel serves as a catalyst, triggering a change in Portnoy's awareness of his own identity. While up to his stay in Israel Portnoy considers himself as exclusively *Jewish*, he learns in Israel that he is also very *American*. Right from the start of the novel, which also marks the beginning of his therapy sessions, Portnoy complains that his parents have instilled a Jewish identity in him. Portnoy does everything possible to ridicule the Jewishness of his family. He meticulously demonstrates all the inconsistencies in the religious practices of assimilated Jews in America. Yet, he also indicates that he is strongly shaped by Jewish culture, frequently using Yiddish expressions and showing that he knows well the traditions to which he objects.

Portnoy spends a great deal of time attempting to convince his reader—and himself—that Jewish education consists of nothing but an assemblage of nonsensical rules and regulations imposed on children: "The hysteria and the superstition! The watch-its and the be-carefuls! You mustn't do this, you can't do that — hold it! don't! you're breaking an important law! *What law? Whose law?* They might as well have had plates in their lips and rings through their noses and painted themselves blue for all the human sense they made! Oh, and the *milchiks* and *flaishiks* besides, all those *meshuggeneh* rules and regulations on top of their own private craziness!"¹ Portnoy cannot see any positive aspect in his Jewish upbringing, and he claims that his awareness of his Jewish heritage is a burden.² At one point in the novel, he even shouts out his refusal to accept Jewish history as part of his tradition. "Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews!" (72). Ironically, Portnoy exposes himself again and again to situations in which he is bound to be unhappy, so that with all his *kvetching* (complaining) he himself seems to be the archetype of the suffering Jew. Thus, the reader is able to see a discrepancy between his words and actions: he complains about the very person he is.

¹ Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986) 35. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text, and all emphases are the author's.

² Helge Norman Nilsen, "Rebellion against Jewishness: *Portnoy's Complaint*," *English Studies* 65.6 (1984): 496.

At first glance, Portnoy seems tired of his Jewish identity. There appears to be no doubt about his rejection of his parents' distinction between Jews and *goyim* (non-Jews). "The very first distinction I learned from you, I'm sure, was not night and day, or hot and cold, but *goyische* and Jewish!" (71) Portnoy nags. Yet, it is obvious to the reader that he shares this categorization of people with his parents. In order to get back at his parents, he does not stay away from non-Jewish women, but looks for them. His compulsive pursuit of non-Jewish women suggests that Portnoy is trying to prove that he has not adopted his parents' perspective. However, he sticks as closely to the categories of Jewish and *goyish* as his parents, only inverting their preferences. Thus, it is evident that Portnoy has learned to live with the categories of "us" and "them." His parents' rejection of non-Jewish women is synonymous with his obsession with these women.

Roth capitalizes on a stereotypical setup: the Jewish male being attracted by the *shikse* (non-Jewish woman). By pushing this stereotypical obsession to an extreme, Roth creates an ironic distance between our perception of the narrator and his perception of himself. Portnoy loses credibility by his exaggerated analogies. When he talks about his visit at his gentile girlfriend's home, he compares himself with his Jewish ancestors in the Babylonian captivity (206). With the help of his relationships with gentile women, Portnoy tries to prove to himself—and to others—that he is fully integrated into American society. Yet, he remains preoccupied with his Jewish identity—a preoccupation he wishes to escape. Subconsciously, the feeling of not being part of the fold is an essential constituent of the way he sees himself. When Portnoy finally visits Israel, it is as someone convinced of his difference.

The title of the episode in Israel is, ironically, "In Exile." According to Jewish tradition, all Jews living outside of Israel are exiles, but for Portnoy being in Israel means being in exile! Evidently the narrator does not use the word "exile" in the conventional way; he uses it to indicate a state of mind, in which he is not at home because he is deprived of his role as an outsider. It is obvious that Portnoy does not find a homeland in Israel but is alienated by the country. Portnoy's visit to Israel is not a religious quest, but is mere tourism—albeit with a self-consciously psychological bent. Consequently, Portnoy's description starts with a list of place-names that are on the average tourist's route through Israel: "Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Jerusalem, Beer-She'va, the Dead Sea, Sodom, 'Ein Gedi, then north to Caesarea, Haifa, Akko, Tiberias, Safed, the upper Galilee. . . . And always it is more dreamy than real" (229). It soon turns out that he is actually at a loss when it comes to defining the purpose of his trip to Israel. Portnoy admits to himself (and to the reader) that he simply ran away from an unpleasant situation. Yet, he begins to question what the purpose of his stay in Israel should be. The only answer he can think of is a very self-conscious one: "I would improve myself, which is my way, after all. Or was, wasn't it? Isn't that why I still read

with a pencil in my hand? To *learn*? To become *better*? (than whom?) So I studied maps in my bed, bought historical and archeological texts and read them" (230).

Ironically, Portnoy proves that he has adopted Jewish values at the very moment he is out to show that he is not really Jewish. His appreciation for learning and self-improvement is the result of Jewish teaching. In contrast to traditional Jews, he does not study Talmud and Torah but historical facts. This shift away from religious studies is symptomatic of his American upbringing as a secular Jew. He differs, however, in one aspect from gentile American tourists—in the way he reacts to the Jewish Israelis. (Israeli and Jew are synonymous for Portnoy—the whole conflict between Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis is neglected in the novel as it would introduce a problem that is totally irrelevant for the self-centered narrator.) Portnoy's biggest shock is his discovery of "one simple but wholly (to me) implausible fact: I am in a Jewish country. In this country, everybody is Jewish" (230). It takes some time for Portnoy to realize that in Israel everything and everyone is Jewish.

Once the message has been driven home to him that he is indeed in a Jewish country, he seems to be forced to repeat again and again his amazement, thus expressing how overwhelming this news is to him. "Hey, here *we're* the WASPs! My taxi passes through a big square surrounded by sidewalk cafés such as one might see in Paris or Rome. Only the cafés are crowded with Jews. The taxi overtakes a bus. I look inside its windows. More Jews. Including the driver. Including the policemen up ahead directing traffic! At the hotel I ask the clerk for a room. He has a thin mustache and speaks English as though he were Ronald Colman. Yet he is Jewish too. . . . Jews eating ices, Jews drinking soda pop, Jews conversing, laughing, walking together arm-in-arm" (231). Even though Portnoy describes only what he sees, it is clear that these sights are important to him. For what strikes him most about Israel is the very normality of Jewish life. Suddenly he is a member of the majority. His language reveals his Americanism since he expresses his new knowledge with an American cliché—"we're the WASPs." Although Portnoy identifies with the Israelis, he also uses an American expression while ignoring the literal meaning of WASP—Portnoy is not Anglo-Saxon, nor is he Protestant. Instead, he uses the word as synonymous for "majority."

While, at first, Portnoy seems to enjoy the sensation of being part of the majority, he soon changes his attitude when he realizes that he is no longer special. This realization of his normality makes him quite irritable and alienates him from the Israelis. As a consequence, he feels alone and vulnerable once again. When some young Israelis approach him to ask for the time, he thinks they are out to get at him. "I look at my watch and realize that they are not going to permit me to pass. They are going to assault me! But how can that be? If they are Jewish and I am Jewish, what motive can there be for them to do me any harm?" (232). While the narrator is absolutely sure of the potential danger, the reader sees that there

is no basis for this fear other than Portnoy's habitual insecurity, to which he clings.

What is the source of Portnoy's fears? Since he is not able to embrace the fact that he is a Jew among Jews in Israel, he does not gain self-assurance. On the contrary, he is left puzzled as his old conception of the world starts to fail him. In America, the division between Jews and non-Jews was one of the most important points of reference in his life. Now that he is deprived of this distinction, he does not know how to view his own identity. In America, being Jewish means being different; in Israel, being Jewish means being like everybody else. Inevitably, the narrator has to change the way he sees himself. Part of his identity was the awareness of belonging to a minority. Now, in Israel, he is forced to redefine the meaning of his Jewish identity.

Gradually, Portnoy comprehends that his position is no longer exceptional. In the process of realizing that he shares his Jewish identity with everybody else in the country, he experiences a sense of loss: he no longer has a special status. It has become impossible for Portnoy to excuse his eccentricity with his minority status; he is no longer part of a minority. These circumstances reveal that without his realizing it, the distinction between the majority of American gentiles and American Jews has become a necessary order in Portnoy's mind. This dichotomizing frame of mind is all the more remarkable because Portnoy constantly complains that his parents perpetuate the same distinction.

Just as Portnoy has learned to see the world in terms of Jews and *goyim*, he has learned that all potential enemies must be anti-Semites, who are, naturally, non-Jews. This concept too fails in Israel. The idea of hostile *goyim* and friendly Jews no longer works for Portnoy.³ He is helpless as soon as he notices that he has to use different categories to assess people. Finally he admits that he is "unable to understand why they should have wished to frighten me so, when we are all Jews" (232). That is to say, he expects a solidarity among Jews on the commonality of ethnic roots. Ironically, the young Jews who approach him to ask for the time have no intention of actually intimidating him.

In America, Portnoy defined himself via his Jewish identity and his sexuality. He even combined these two aspects by seeing himself as a kind of savior of non-Jewish women. The American women with whom he is acquainted are intellectually inferior to him and are in no way a challenge. His first encounter with an Israeli woman, however, is quite the opposite. The effect is Portnoy's symbolic impotence when he is with Naomi. Roth uses a literary cliché to demonstrate that the American Jew cannot "function" and "succeed" in Israel. Instead of having sex with Naomi, Portnoy gets an ideological lesson from her.

³ Sanford Pinsker, *The Comedy that "Hoits": An Essay on the Fiction of Philip Roth* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975) 68.

Without mercy, she reveals to him that most of his life has been a self-deception because he is not really bringing about any social changes through his work. Step by step, Naomi criticizes American society and with it the foundation of Portnoy's life. She criticizes him for being American and she blames him for not using his intelligence to serve the cause of justice.

To top it off, Naomi accuses him of displaying a "Ghetto humor" (241) that is absolutely despicable. In the end, Portnoy understands that she rejects him for what he is: "By dawn I had been made to understand that I was the epitome of what was most shameful in 'the culture of the Diaspora'" (241). (The underlying pun on "at dawn," "it dawned on me," makes the reader smile at the narrator's expense.) Naomi contrasts the proud Israelis with the Diaspora Jews, who not only allow others to put them down but who put themselves down too. Thus, Portnoy is not accepted in Israel because he lacks the self-esteem of the Israeli Jews. Even the portrayal of the proud Israeli woman officer is nothing but another stereotype. The narrator presents Naomi as a woman who is so indoctrinated with Zionist ideas that she has lost "feminine" qualities. Since Portnoy and Naomi do not share the same ideology, they fail to communicate. As a result, the differences between American Jews and non-Jews come to seem fewer than those between American Jews and the Israeli Jews that Naomi represents.

One drastic difference between Israeli Jews and American Jews is the use of Yiddish. Portnoy uses fewer Yiddish words in his narration of events in Israel than in his accounts of his experiences in America. One possible explanation for the decrease of Yiddish words in Portnoy's speech might be his awareness of the negative evaluation of Yiddish in Israel. Yiddish and the Jewish humor of East Europe are closely associated with a ghetto mentality which the Sabras, the native-born Israelis, reject. The only instance of an Israeli actually using Yiddish in the novel occurs when Naomi, lacking any other word to show her detestation for him, swears at Portnoy by calling him a *shlemiel* (a chump) (241). Resorting to this ghetto vocabulary, Naomi demonstrates that there is no bigger offense for her than to be considered one of the Diaspora Jews.

Since Portnoy does not want to become a target of hostile Israeli attacks on his Diaspora ghetto mentality, he uses only a few Yiddish words. In America, Yiddish is considered an indication of an authentic ethnic trait. In Israel, Yiddish does not have this function because there is no need to show off one's ethnicity. Thus, on the level of language the narrator has to adopt a new way of self-expression. Not only does the number of Yiddish words decrease in Portnoy's narration about his experiences in Israel, but so do his jokes. Obviously, he has not found the right words to distance himself from the negative experiences he has had in Israel, so his sense of humor escapes him in this context.

In a kind of self-defense, Portnoy's language becomes more pronouncedly American in Israel. Reacting to Naomi's accusations, he does not only call her Sabra, giving the word a negative connotation, but he goes so far as to call her a "Fucking Hebrew saint!" (241). Although the protagonist does not acknowledge it, his vocabulary is strongly influenced by non-Jewish American words. Since he has been very aware of how his Jewishness contrasts with the normative Christianity of his fellow Americans, Portnoy ought to be alert to any Christian concepts; but in Israel the image of a "saint" comes to him without a second thought, nor does he refrain from using it. This is an isolated example of Portnoy's use of Christian terminology. Perhaps Portnoy is less reluctant to resort to Christian vocabulary here because he has just come to realize that English—not Hebrew—is his native language. "English happens, oddly enough, to be *my* mother tongue!" (239). Consequently, it might not matter that much to Portnoy at this stage whether a word he uses refers to Christian ideologies.

In the Israeli environment it is no longer important for the narrator to emphasize his Jewish identity by differentiating himself from Christian Americans. Instead, he feels an increasing opposition to the Sabras who look down on him because of his bourgeois American behavior. He develops a sense of not belonging to Israel, which in turn leads him to focus on his American identity. His exclamation, "I am impure—and also . . . tired . . . of never being quite good enough for The Chosen People!" (242) demonstrates Portnoy's growing frustration with the Israelis. Interestingly, Portnoy narrows the meaning of "Chosen People" since he no longer perceives this term as a designation of all Jews but of Israeli Jews only. Again, he denies himself the comfort of being accepted as a member of a society—this time Israeli society. In order to become integrated into Israeli society, he would have to deny his American roots, an option he cannot choose. Thus, Portnoy finds himself in the same situation that he had encountered in America. He is again an outsider, and the personal challenges he has to face in Israel are even greater. In America, Portnoy was able to prove his social consciousness by simply pursuing his job as a city commissioner for public welfare, but in Israel this type of job does not suffice to show commitment to the Jewish people. A real engagement in Israeli affairs might mean an involvement in the work of one of the *kibbutzim*, which would possibly mean physical labor for the first time in his life. As the very idea of physical labor is alien to his middle-class American upbringing, it is not surprising that Portnoy is never tempted to do anything for the Jewish cause in Israel.

Although it is true that for Portnoy "Israel is out,"⁴ it is too rash to conclude that this is the author's general message for American Jews. In fact, Roth makes no comment on Jewish-American immigration to Israel. The novel does, however, rule out the possibility of Israel serving as a miraculous cure for a

⁴ Meyer Levin, "What is an American Jewish Writer?" *Congress Biweekly* 39 (1972): 23.

neurotic American Jew. Portnoy is doomed to fail in Israel because he has the wrong motivation for going there. His decision to go to Israel was not based on a new affirmation of his Jewishness, but on the assumption that all problems originating in the double identity of an American Jew will solve themselves once he enters Israel. Therefore, the novel only demonstrates that Israel does not offer an easy way out for the internalized conflicts of Diaspora Jews.

What then is the outcome of the narrator's experiences in Israel? Portnoy seems to lack a true understanding of his difficulties in Israel. He resorts to yet another lamentation: "Ow my heart! And in Israel! Where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary and peace, Portnoy now perishes! Where other Jews flourish, I now expire! And all I wanted was to give a little pleasure—and make a little for myself. Why, why can I not have some pleasure without the retribution following behind like a caboose!" (246). His words imply that Portnoy thinks he is being punished for sinful pleasures. In the context of the following text, we can even see that he feels guilty because of his abusive behavior towards his gentile girlfriends, thus accepting some form of punishment as his due share. Although Portnoy pretends to be an atheist, he has evidently internalized the traditional Jewish belief in a punitive God. While the narrator is in denial of his Jewish identity, the reader gets a clear sense of Portnoy's Jewishness.

Strikingly enough, Portnoy's monologue stops with his whining about the futility of his life. Thus, it seems that Portnoy has left Israel with a more acute sense of confusion. One of the sources of his confusion is the refusal of the Israelis to acknowledge him as a special person. Besides, all his accomplishments are questioned by Israeli standards. Portnoy does not fit in with Israeli society, nor does he really try to fit in. He has come to realize that America is his homeland, just as English is his native language. However, at the end of his monologue he has still not come to understand the implications of his American rootedness.

Together with the psychoanalyst in the book, the reader might say: "Now vee may perhaps begin" (250). How is the reader to interpret the chapter on Israel in the book? Obviously, Portnoy has so far not been able to benefit from Jewish nor from American values.⁵ That is to say, he has not admitted to himself that he has internalized Jewish and American values. More importantly, he has denied the fact that he enjoys his marginality in American society. Portnoy's experiences in Israel offer him a chance to perceive his Jewish-American identity in a more positive light. It is much easier for him to get special attention as an

⁵ See Gene Blustein, "Portnoy's Complaint: The Jew as American," *The Canadian Review of American Studies* 7 (1976): 73.

ethnic American than as a Jew among Israeli Jews. The end of the novel suggests that getting special attention, however, is essential for Portnoy's ego.