

JEWISH VALUES IN THE FICTION OF NORMAN MAILER

M A S H E Y B E R N S T E I N

IN THE PAST YEAR OR SO as a result of the publication of *The Castle in the Forest*, Mailer has tackled his “Jewish question” in a way that brings him if not back to the “nice” Jewish boy image he eschewed many years ago at least to an acknowledgement of that past in a way that embraces it with new warmth and understanding. Not that he ever really denied his Jewish past. Even though Mailer has never been considered a major figure in the canon of American-Jewish writers or as concerned about purely Jewish issues as his contemporaries Bellow, Malamud, or Philip Roth, he has never disavowed his religious affiliations. Nearly all his central characters claim some sort of Jewish parentage or ancestry, from Rojack to Harlot and, of course, Jesus. On the personal level, when several years ago I was stranded in New York on Passover and had nowhere to go for the seder, I called up Norman and asked if I could conduct one in his house. He readily agreed, admitting it would be his first seder in fifty years! During the seder, at which John Buffalo, his youngest, recited the four questions, it was delightful to watch Norman explain the Hebrew alphabet to John and read some of the Hebrew script.

Mailer encapsulates his own attitude to Judaism very succinctly in an interview he gave earlier in 2007 with Nermeen Shaikh and published in *Nextbook*. When she asked, “what role has your being Jewish played in your being a writer,” Mailer replies emphatically, “an *enormous* role.” He picks two aspects of the Jewish experience that influenced him, the sense of history that makes it “impossible to take anything for granted” and also the Jewish mind: “We’re here to do all sorts of outrageous thinking, if you will ... certainly incisive thinking. If the Jews brought anything to human nature, it’s that they developed the mind more than other people did.” Not surprisingly, Mailer

continues in the interview to bemoan the loss of this ability owing to what he terms “cheap religious patriotism.”

None of these ideas surprises me, nor will they any reader of Mailer’s work, as they have always been part of the core of his philosophy. Mailer’s ideology, as an American writer and social commentator, stems from both the intellectual ideas of Judaism and how these ideas make themselves manifest in our daily lives. I doubt that any of us would deny that Mailer is a writer who is concerned with the spiritual nature of humankind, a writer who at the end of the last millennium can seek to bring the story of Jesus Christ to life and at the beginning of the new millennium can write with perfect seriousness about the role of the Devil in the creation of one of the greatest monsters in Western history. But his writings on the battle of Good and Evil have nothing in common with the rantings of a Hal Lindsey or with other apocalyptic and generally Christian fables. Mailer’s ideology derives essentially from a Jewish approach to life.

Just as fights between the God and Devil belong to an earlier time frame, Mailer’s Jewishness similarly echoes a more ancient time when religion was seen in a purer form. Mailer’s Jewish identity emerges not so much from obedience to the Law, the letter of the Torah, but from the spiritual underpinnings—the implications and intent of those laws—that go to the core of Judaism. There are three basic ideas in Judaism that play a prominent role in his *oeuvre*: 1. The concept of *mitzvah*; 2. the emphasis on the here and now; and 3. the prophet’s role in society. These themes are as prominent, in one form or another, in his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, as they were in his first, *The Naked and the Dead*.

Mitzvah is usually interpreted or translated as “commandment,” as in thou shalt or shalt not do x. In colloquial Hebrew as in Yiddish, to do a *mitzvah* is to do a good deed or a favor, but Mailer’s notion of *mitzvah* finds a clear expression in the writings of the philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel who sees *mitzvah* as a holy action, a deed that reveals and transforms a person:

In every act we perform we assume that the world is meaningful. Life would come to naught if we acted as if there were no ultimate meaning.... Jewish observance ... consists of acts performed by the body in a clearly defined and tangible manner ... of the right intentions and of putting the right intention into

action. Both the body and soul must participate in carrying out a ritual, a law, an imperative, a mitzvah. (*God in Search of Man* 307)

This is an idea expressed in almost identical terms by Mailer in his seminal essay, “The White Negro,” where the “impulse to action” expresses the need to live with the demands of life and not succumb to the void:

[A] life...directed by one's faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful but mysterious. (*Advertisements for Myself* 341)

By committing an action, the “hipster,” as Mailer called his heroes in those days, activates his whole being, not just his intellect or his physical being, but also his spirit and his soul. Action creates. It is a means of survival, for through action, instinctive and intuitive, he defines himself from within. As Mailer said in the essay “Minorities,” one of his most important statements on his Jewish identity, he becomes an “artistic nerve” reacting and sensitive to his being. This notion of meaningful action motivates nearly all of Mailer's heroes from Sergeant Croft in *Naked*, to Rojack in *American Dream* and even one could argue to Jesus in *Gospel*. Action is “holy,” a method for defining one's soul and not “secular” aimed at achieving material results in the external world. In the *Pirkei Avoth*, a collection of sayings by the Rabbis in the Talmud, Rabbi Ben Azzai notes “that one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah and a sin will lead to another” (*Complete Art Scroll Siddur* 544). One grows in strength as one performs holy deeds just as sinful deeds sap the soul. Stephen Rojack can only fight with Barney Oswald Kelly after he has put himself through lesser acts of bravery and self-discovery.

The acts that best serve as the conduit for this development are those that depend on a connection with other people. Sexual intercourse and violence depend most on the “healthy” communion with the reality of other beings. I know that these ideas have been a source of glee or misunderstanding for critics of Mailer and here is not the place to explore these notions, though I have to say that in my reading the use of the terms *sex* and *violence* is more metaphoric than literal. He does not, for example, advocate murder as a way of life—the tragedy of the Jack Abbott episode brings this home—but

Mailer, taking a page from another misunderstood Jew, Wilhelm Reich, instead suggests that any action that goes against the norms of society is by implication “violent,” and any action that seeks to open communication with the reality of another is “sexual.” Because of this theory, he denounces any social phenomenon that denies a man the means “to purge his violence” and hence prevent his soul from “... being ... frozen with implacable self-hatred for his cowardice” (*AFM* 347).

Mailer extends this notion of *mitzvah*, of meaningful action, to his concerns about the spiritual value of humankind in a corrupt and fallen world. In the face of a threat against the integrity of the self, individuals cannot shirk their responsibility to discover their own set of values. Only by this discovery can they reclaim themselves from the surrounding chaos. Mailer’s concerns are totally spiritual: Humankind, he believes, is God’s agent, fighting His battles. Human activity becomes a symbolic drama where, as Charles Feidelson notes in his text *Symbolism and American Literature*, “every passage of life, enmeshed in the vast context of God’s plan, possesses a delegated meaning” (79). Richard Poirier in his book on Mailer states it best, “[Mailer] is dependent on a past which is essentially mythic and he prefers to think of himself as someone living within the perils of time while knowing he is the carrier of life which is not wholly his own to waste” (105). This is a very unchristian approach to life. In this scenario, there is no Jesus to save one, no afterlife that will reward one. Since Jesus cannot call on Jesus to save himself, ironically Jesus in Mailer’s world is the ultimate (Jewish) hero. His Jesus is full of doubt, not quite sure of his role, questioning his sayings and more importantly his actions. Mailer pointed out the genesis of his creative theory in *The Spooky Art*:

I decided my character had to be more of a man than a god, an existential man, dominated by the huge cloud that he is the Son of God. Jesus, as the protagonist, doesn’t feel worthy, but he is ready nonetheless to do his best every step of the way. Not in command of every situation, but will do his best. And he does have his startling successes. (87)

Every action, then, that individuals perform has a significance that detracts or adds to the sum of all meaning, ordering chaos, inventing form, and flowing into the flux of Time, every action, individually realized and existentially

self-defining is a dance over the hot coals of life. No scene in *Gospel* brings this out more than Jesus's encounter with the Devil, the most admired section of the novel. In this section, the naïve Jesus tackles a being of infinite seductiveness, power, and wit. (Like Milton, Mailer finds himself giving some of the best lines to the Devil, which may be why he returned to this character for his last novel.) The Devil uses every trick in the book from the physical to the spiritual, from hallucinations to lying to undermine Jesus, but the Son is up to the task and if anything, by fighting the Devil he discovers his own powers and destiny.

If I could increase in my powers...perhaps the world of men might multiply in virtue with me. So I had begun to believe in my Father.... I had been tested, had proved loyal, and now my tongue began to feel clean. (57)

While Jesus knows who his father is, he still has to learn who he is and make the connection between the two so that God's plans can be fulfilled.

I was obliged to wonder. Why had the Lord left me alone with Satan? Was it to scourge me of an excess of piety? Before long I would learn that there might be truth in this. There was work to do, and it could not be accomplished on one's knees. (57)

In a way we are all children of God, as Mailer noted in the aforementioned interview:

God wants to do more and gave us free will precisely because we're God's children.... I see God as a creative artist ... but not all powerful. And not all-good. And so, as an artist, God wants us to go further than God went. (Shaikh)

Human beings therefore have lives that are not theirs to waste, as Cherry explains in *An American Dream*:

I always end up with something like the idea that God is weaker because I didn't turn out well.... I believe God is just doing *His* best to learn from what happens to some of us. (197)

Mailer, though, gives an interesting spin on this essentially Jewish idea. In his telling, God moves from being all-powerful and an artist par excellence to ironically a sort of conservative economist, harvesting his energies in a way that would make the most ardent environmentalist happy. Again, in the *Nextbook* interview, he expounds on this long-held credo:

The world is much too fraught with peril and much too important a creation, to have it as a stage play where we do what we do, work at how we work, and if we please God, we go to heaven, if we displease we go to hell. Very wasteful, totally uneconomic.

I am reminded of that wonderful discussion in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* about the way that God plays the odds in a football game:

“Because footballs ... take funny bounces. It is not practical to get better than four out of five. That's good enough. If [God] wanted to take account of the physics of every bounce, He'd have to do a million times more work in His calculations in order to get up from eighty to ninety-nine percent. That's not economical. He's got too many other things to work at.” (160)

Mailer liked this idea so much, he repeated it virtually verbatim in *Harlot's Ghost*!

The third aspect of Mailer's work that owes a debt to his Jewish heritage might be the most obvious one: The idea of the Jew as “prophet” or “social commentator.” In *The Naked and the Dead*, Joey Goldstein's grandfather, speaking of the people of Israel, refers to an idea posited by Judah Halevi, the Kuzari, an eleventh-century Spanish Jewish mystic: Israel “is the heart of all nations ... the heart is also the conscience” (247). If you will forgive the Jewish chauvinism, one that I am sure Mailer does not subscribe to either, the Kuzari lays down a template for how the Jew must behave and the implications of that role:

The Jew is the heart because he [*sic*] is endowed ... with the most perfect soul and the loftiest intellect which it is possible for a human to possess and ... [w]ith ... an immanence

enabling him to enter into a communication with God. (Heinemann 144)

The Jew is therefore endowed with the “spirit of continual prophecy.” In such a state the Jew is of the people, yet in a state of awareness that raises the Jew above the rest. Mailer secularizes this concept when he writes in “Minorities”: “Minority groups are the artistic nerves of a republic and, like any phenomenon which has to do with art, they are profoundly divided. They are both themselves and the mirror of their culture as it reacts upon them” (“Tenth” 626). This notion helps to explain Mailer’s concern not only with God’s power and destiny as manifested by humankind on Earth, but also connects with his concerns about the nature of modern society. He is a witness to individuals’ being deprived of their potential for beauty and art and, like the watchman of the night, feels impelled to call out his warning. Nearly fifty years ago, he had seen “authority and nihilism stalking one another in the orgiastic hollow of this century” (*AFM* 94) and he has trumpeted his horror at every opportunity to make a “revolution in the consciousness of our time” (*AFM* 17). But as the Good Book says, “the prophet is never heard in his own city,” and it must be cold comfort to the prophet to see us back at this point again after brief bursts of light shining on us.

Mailer’s prophetic tendencies have been considered unruly and intemperate but what prophet has not been considered that way, from Isaiah, who stormed into the royal palace, to Jeremiah, who was thrown into jail, to Jesus, who ended up crucified? As Heschel puts it,

The prophet’s words are outbursts of violent emotions. His rebuke is harsh and relentless. But if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails. (6)

Not without validity, Judaism, or at least the left wing branch of it, remains synonymous with prophecy, as Will Herberg in *Judaism and Modern Man* points out: Jewish tradition “is one continuous story of the witness of faith against those who hold power ... in every case it is the man [*sic*]... of faith challenging the inordinate pretensions of official society” (185).

Bernard Sherman in *The Invention of the Jew* applies the term *prophecy* to writers who share this response to the problems of modern humankind—Mailer among them:

Each found that the distinctively Jewish element was the demand—very often in fervid, prophetic, even mystical terms—that man [*sic*] fulfill his highest possibilities, that he achieves a Messianic release in a world in which mind and justice were triumphant. The locus of this spirit of social compassion is the prophetic vision of Isaiah. (16)

It is a connection well known, and as Nathan Glazer in *American Judaism* points out: “the Jewish religious tradition probably does dispose Jews ... towards liberalism and radicalism” (139). Mailer emerges from this Jewish tradition, the strong left-wing liberal side, which while eschewing ritual, rabbi took to heart its strong social concerns. Sherman also notes this attraction of Jews to the most “prophetic” of all -isms, Marxism. One recalls Mailer’s own involvement with Wallace’s Progressive Party and his detailed study of Marxism in his second novel, *Barbary Shore*. Similarly, these prophetic concerns predominate in his novels, *The Deer Park*, which has as its backdrop, Hollywood, the HUAC, and the Korean War; *An American Dream*, a panoramic study of a garden gone to seed; and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, a study of a schizophrenic nation, to mention but a few instances.

The role of prophet is one that Mailer has often portrayed himself as playing: “He has been a poor prophet of the Sixties but it was not a century for prophets” (*Of a Fire on the Moon* 141). (The prophets were not “nice Jewish boys” either.) Every novel, every piece of fiction, essay, or work of reportage of Mailer’s has a touchstone quality about it, showing us where we are at a particular moment in time. Even more so, it has led to some of his most beautiful writing:

Let the bugle blow. The death of America rides in on the smog. America—the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power.... Deliver us from our curse. For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep. (*The Armies of the Night* 316–317)

Reading this quotation, I am reminded of Mailer's comment on Henry Miller: "a writer of the largest dimension can alter the nerves and marrow of a nation" (GAL 191). I think it is an apt appraisal of Mailer's *own* contribution to our nation's literature and consciousness.

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