Chapter 111

Imprisonment and Other Minor Themes

To Malamud, the central metaphor for Jewishness is imprisonment. Even when no fences are present, his Jews remain fenced. Malamud is influenced and inspired by the ancient Hebrew writings. This imprisonment and prison in Malamud's fictional world can be in the physical environment like a real prison cell in a dungeon, a shtetl, an artist's garret a tenement, a grocery store, or anything he feels confined in. It can also lie in by one's own self and within one's self, being confined by one's ineptitudes thus becoming a victim of one's own self as it is seen in the Hebrew writings. Metaphorically this prison becomes an acceptance of life's limitations and responsibilities. Ironically there can be freedom in imprisonment.

Robert Alter in the essay "Jewishness as Metaphor" says that imprisonment is seen in the novels as a general image for the moral life and "the prison is Malamud's way of suggesting that to be fully human is to accept the most painful limitations; those who escape these limitations achieve only an illusory self-negating kind of freedom, for they become less than responsible human beings" (35). Malamud also says: "It's[prison] a metaphor for the dilemma of all men throughout history. Necessity is the primary prison though the bars are not visible at all. There are man made prisons of social injustice, apathy and ignorance"(12). The idea of Jewishness as imprisonment occurs in The Assistant. The novel is replete with claustrophobic or confined places. Morris Bober's grocery with its hard responsibilities and alienation is an exact prison. For Morris and Frank "the store was fixed, a cave, motionless"(58). Morris thinks: "In a store you were entombed"(6), and "The store looked like a long dark tunnel"(4). Frank thinks: "they are born prisoners"(86) to have to shut down in an "overgrown coffin" (86). In The
Fixer, Shtetl is prison for Yakov Bok. Therefore he leaves the Shtetl only to land in a real prison with all its hardships and agonies.

In the Hebraic tradition, the term imprisonment is sometimes a metaphor. The use of the image of imprisonment to suggest a state of suffering and helplessness can be traced back to the ancient Psalms. The sufferer finds no hope. All men shun him, and he is cut off from social life. His life is ebbing away. He feels like a man, helpless and abandoned, left to lie on the grave. He suffers alone, deserted by his friends. He feels that he is imprisoned and he cannot escape. The psalmist says:

So many troubles have fallen on me/ that I am close to death./ I am like all others who are about to die; all my strength is gone./ I am abandoned among the dead; / I am like the slain lying in their graves, those you have forgotten completely, / who are beyond your help. You have thrown me into the depths of the tomb, / into the darkest and deepest pit. Your anger lies heavy on me, / and I am crushed beneath its waves. You have caused my friends to abandon me; / You have made me repulsive to them. Imprisoned I cannot escape; / my eyes are weak from suffering./ Lord, everyday I call to you/ and lift my hands to you in prayer. (Ps.88:3-9)

Claustrophobic images recur frequently in the works of Hebrew writers and especially in The Book of Job. When tested with a series of calamities, Job remains silent for seven days, not having sinned with his lips, but displaying signs of deep agony. This length of time on the ash-heap is a claustrophobic image. Ash-heap is a prison and the illness, and the excruciating pain is imprisonment for him. Job imagines that God has surrounded him with a fence so that he cannot find any way of escape from his predicament: "God keeps their future hidden and hems them in on every
side” (3:23). Still accusing God, Job describes his present predicament as that of a prisoner closely confined and constantly watched. His feet are put in chains. Thus God marks the prisoner’s feet so that he can track his prints wherever he goes. Here he complains about the lack of freedom to move about. Therefore he is far from God’s favour: “You bind chains on my feet, / you watch every step I take, / and even examine my foot prints” (13:27).

The central development of the idea of Jewishness as imprisonment is seen in *The Assistant*. The claustrophobic and tomblike grocery where Morris Bober spends most of his time, with all the hard responsibilities and loneliness, is referred to as a prison. In an interview by Daniel Stern in 1975 Malamud says:

Perhaps, I use it (prison) as a metaphor for the dilemma of all men: necessity, whose bars we look through and try not to see: social injustice, apathy, ignorance. The personal prison of entrapment in past experience; guilt, obsession—the somewhat blind or blinded itself, in other words. A man has to construct, invent, his freedom. Imagination helps. A truly great man or woman extends it for others in the process of creating his or her own. (62)

Morris Bober’s grocery which is the symbolic locus of being a Jew with all the sufferings entailed thereby, is frequently referred to as a prison in *The Assistant*. Morris Bober gazes into the street. He wishes that he could once more be out in the open as he used to be when he was a boy. He was never in the house as a boy: “But in a store you were entombed” (6). When Frank Alpine tells him that he likes to buy a store, Morris Bober says: “A store is a prison. Look for something better” (33). Later he says: What he feared most was that he would make another mistake and again settle in a prison (224).
The novel is suffused with images of claustrophobic containment. Frank Alpine is sick to death of everything in the store. He thinks: "What kind of man did you have to be born to shut yourself in and overgrown coffin? . . . you had to be a Jew. They are born prisoners" (86). Later Frank reads a book about Jewish history. His understanding of it is applied to Morris Bober in the store: "He ... reads about the ghettos, where the half starved, bearded prisoners spent their lives trying to figure it out why they were the chosen people." Frank himself, from the beginning is trying to get into this prison. He says: "With me one wrong thing leads to another and it ends in a trap" (36).

Malamud's Jews are more metaphoric than literal, the imagery of imprisonment turns out to be the symbolic representation of an already symbolic state. The Jewish sense of being "chosen" itself is a disastrous entanglement for the protagonists. The evocation of imprisonment is Malamud's way of suggesting that to be fully human is to accept the most painful limitations. If someone escapes these limitations, they become irresponsible human beings. Malamud sees a model in the Jewish experience and confinement. He sees also a sort of freedom in imprisonment. Malamud's prison or imprisonment is a metaphor for Jewishness and this prison makes the Jew much more than a trapped group of half starved, bearded prisoners. Malamud's literary achievement is that he has presented his Jewish experience in his own way to raise it into a symbol. It is appropriate that he has selected "prison" to give Jewishness a fresh meaning and he has magnified the term to raise it to the level of a symbol or metaphor. In an interview by Leslie and Joyce Fields Malamud says:

It (the prison) is a metaphor for the dilemma of all men throughout history. Necessity is the primary prison, though the bars are not visible to all. Then there are the man-made prisons of social injustice, apathy, ignorance. There are others, tight or loose, visible or invisible, according to one's predilection or
vulnerability. Therefore our most extraordinary invention is human Freedom. (12)

The Fixer is a serious study of suffering of a Jew at the hands of anti-Semitism. It probes into the human psyche and evokes pathos and empathy. It stands unique in the artistic world of Malamud for its imaginative treatment of history. The story is based on an actual historical incident of Jewish persecution - the trial of Mendel Beiliss (1913) in Kiev for the false accusation of the “ritual murder” of a Christian child. Over half a century ago, in September 1913, a mysterious trial takes place in a Kiev courtroom. An ordinary unassuming Jewish employee of a local brick factory is falsely charged with the murder of a Christian boy whose blood is to be used for ritual purposes, but the man is eventually declared innocent of crime. The same story is resurrected in The Fixer. Malamud has skilfully instilled history into a product of artistic imagination. The actual events are remodeled to fit the inner logic of the narrative. The Fixer deals with events preceding the trial. By the last scene when the trial is about to begin, we are convinced that it is not Yakov Bok but rather his oppressors who are to be judged.

The term “blood accusation” was born in the middle ages. According to Samuel Maurice, it is a revival with certain changes, of the accusation leveled at the early Christians by the Romans. The early Christians lived in a community of love and agape and they observed great secrecy about their religious practice. The Jews came forward with many fantastic interpretations of what they were doing. They said that the Christians were eating someone’s body and drinking his blood. This led to the accusation that they were killing children and eating their flesh and drinking their blood at their religious ceremonies. This was known as “blood accusation.” The news spread up to the Roman empire. They began to persecute the Christians. Thus the third and fourth centuries are termed “the age of martyrs.” According to Maurice Samuel
The Blood Accusation, as it is called, the accusation that the Jewish religion calls for the periodic ritualistic consumption of the blood of a Christian, was born in the Middle Ages at that about this time of the First Crusade, it was a revival, with certain changes, of the accusation leveled at the early Christians by the Romans. Nevertheless the Blood Accusation persisted down into modern times, and nearly every recurrence was attended by the threat or perpetration of massacre and pillage. (281)

The same Blood Accusation, leveled at the early Christians by the Jews is now reversed and leveled at the Jews as a punishment of their crimes. The Jew is looked upon not as an individual but as a whole race. The Jews suffered and drank the chalice of their suffering to the brim as a penance for their killing of Jesus in spite of his innocence. Perhaps what they suffered in the concentration camps at the time of Hitler was to atone for their sins. Yet, according to Malamud, the suffering of the innocent victim is always injustice.

Malamud explores the history of Mendel Beiliss case in The Fixer to depict human suffering and injustice. Human predicament is presented through the metaphor of prison. Here the central metaphor merges with the action of the novel which is Yakov’s tortures and torments in the real prison. Yakov, the protagonist in the novel, is a prisoner of tradition, the chosen nature of the Jew. Fed up with the poverty and the consequent predicaments, he flees the prison-like Shtetl for Kiev, the center of anti-Semitism. There he becomes the prisoner once again, under the clutches of the goys. Though he conceals his Jewish identity, he is suspected and arrested when a Christian boy is found...
murdered. His very concealment of Jewishness becomes the confirmation of their suspicion. They fabricate evidence against him and accuse the entire Jews of “Ritual murder.” They keep him in prison for three years without indictment. They torture him very cruelly and inhumanely as the Jews had tortured and crucified years ago. Robert Alter in his “Jewishness as Metaphor” says:

Circumstances force Yakov Bok, who sought to escape from the Shtetl to a new world of possibilities in the big city, into being a Jew despite himself. And he becomes, of course, a Jew in Malamud’s special sense, a prisoner placed in progressively restricting confinement—from communal cell to solitary confinement to being shackled to the wall hand and foot—who is mangled physically and mentally by his imprisonment but never lets himself surrender his integrity because of it. (40)

The theme of imprisonment is seen in the short stories. The nine stories Malamud wrote before the publication of The Assistant are prison-like stories: "Armistice," "The Grocery Store," "Riding Pants," "The Cost of Living," "The First Seven Years," "The Prison," "The Death of Me," "The Bill" and "The Loan." "The Cost of Living" which depicts a poor grocer who works for sixteen hours a day as a failure and he at last closes down his store. There are characters in the stories that parallel Morris Bober, Ida, Karp and Breitbart of The Assistant. "The First Seven Years" also has parallels with The Assistant. Sobel instructs Feld and Feld attains moral growth like Frank Alpine in the end, following the father-son relationship in the Hebraic tradition. As Frank is attracted to Helen, Sobel is attracted to Feld’s daughter Miriam. Like Frank tries to earn for Helen through work in the store and sacrifices his life, Sobel works two more years before claiming Miriam. The theme of learning through suffering pervades in the stories. Tommy in "The Prison" learns from his own suffering in the store and tries to do good for others. Josip and Emilio are given
advice by Marcus in "The Death of Me." In "The Bill," Willy has a gradual growth like Frank. In "The Loan," Bessie acts like Ida Bober. They are all store-based stories. For the protagonists the store is a prison. To be confined in the store is imprisonment for them. The characters try to serve others and give compassion and understanding to the needy. The characters do not just remain store keepers, but they remain the keepers of the essence of what it is to be human. "The Bill" recounts the Jew- Gentile relationship and, imprisonment in a grocery store. It is a blend of the real and fantastic and horror and triumph. The opening paragraph is realistic and impressionistic at the same time:

Though the street was somewhere near a river, it was land locked and narrow, a crooked row of aged brick tenement buildings. A child throwing a ball straight up saw a bit of pale sky. On the corner, opposite the blackened tenement where Willy Schlegel worked as janitor, stood another like it except that this included the only store on the street-going down five stone steps into the basement, a small dark, delicatessen owned by Mr. And Mrs. F. Panessa, really a hole in the wall. (145)

The Schlegels- Panessas episode is the center of the dramatic action, but Willy steals the heart of the reader. He looks after the store and works for the progress of the store and is the victim of the reveries of a weary life. Store is an overgrown coffin for Willy. The image of claustrophobic containment is Willy's store here in the story "The Bill." Willy narrates to Panessa the horrors of his barren life. As he speaks, he buys things one after another. But he cannot pay and so Mr. Panessa gives credit to him and thinks: "Because after all what was credit but the fact that people were human beings, and if you were really a human being you gave credit to somebody else he gave credit to you " (146-47).
Here we come across a story of how a soul descends into an embittering nightmare when goodness is denied. Willy encounters nightmare when Panessa asks for the payment. He harbours grievance in his mind. During winter nights he dreams of repaying, and grieves over his inability to repay, in the days. The pain torments him and at last his sympathy for Schlegels turns to hatred. In the spring, a flash of repentance and redemption pass through his mind. On the spur of the moment he dashes to the pawnshop, gets ten dollars for his overcoat and rushes to Panessa. But there he is welcomed by a hearse, and a coffin is being carried by two men. When he hears that it is Panessa, he becomes hysterical: "He tried to say something but his tongue hung in his mouth like a dead fruit on a tree, and his heart was a black-painted window" (153). Malamud concludes the story: "Mrs. Panessa moved away to live first with one stone-faced daughter, then with the other. And the bill was never paid"(153). Here we experience the O. Henry twist. In the beginning we are relaxed by the sense of a give-and-take situation, but at the end every thing is crushed down.

In "Naked Nude," Fidelman is seen in Milan, a homeless ex-artist turned pickpocket who has been blackmailed by two hoodlums, Anglo and Scarpio. He is forced to slave away in a brothel. They plan a scheme to steal a painting by Titian and replace it with a Fidelman forgery. Fidelman must do the forging and stealing if he wants his freedom. When he objects to the dishonesty of stealing another painter's ideas and work, the brothel keeper forces him. He does and in the process he falls in love with his own forgery, steals and escapes. Before the finale, he suffers the usual humiliations which Malamud has reserved for schlemiels. Sheldon J. Hershinow says:

"Naked Nude" gives the reader insight into an unromanticized view of art: by having Fidelman steal his own imitations of Titan's Venus of Urbino, Malamud slyly suggests that the artist's passion for his work in reality contains more of Narcissism than
love of beauty. Fidelman, however, does not grasp this insight.

Another dimension is that he may be understood in terms of imprisonment. Fidelman is often the prisoner of his own created situations. In "Naked Nude," he is held prisoner in a house of prostitution by two gangsters. In Malamud's stories there are prisons galore in which the inmates are the schlemiels. All the characters seem to accept the most painful limitations to be a perfect man, lacking in nothing. Frank Alpine in The Assistant is imprisoned in Morris Bober's grocery store. Yakov Bok, an innocent man is seized by history and thrown into a prison where he is tortured and humiliated by the vicious circle of prison authorities. Harry Lesser in "The Tenants" is a self-imposed prisoner in the tenement.

Malamud has a preoccupation with discipline which is a part of his racial heritage. The Jews had bound themselves to six hundred and thirteen commandments—ethical rules, social duties, religious beliefs, dietary regulations etc. William Freedman in his article, "From Bernard Malamud, With Discipline and Love" says:

According to the legend, before God gave his Law to the Israelites he wandered among all the other nations and asked of each, "Will you accept my Torah, my law?" All refused it. At this God came to Israel and asked, "Will you accept the Torah?" They inquired, "What is written therein?" He answered, "Six hundred and thirteen commandments." And they replied, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will hear." (157)

Judaism is a religion of instinctual renunciation and Jews pride themselves on their restraint, their and self-control which enables them to abstain from immediate gratification in the interest of long-range goals. In
exchange for the blessings of a brighter future, the Jews accept the yoke of the law. They prepare themselves for heaven with education enduring and suffering. Malamud is provocatively and habitually concerned with the subject of discipline. According to William Freedman, the fifties, when Malamud was writing his novels, were the decade of discipline; ... it was one of the principal items on the literary menu, the speciality of the house if the restaurant happened to be kosher" (156). In *The Assistant* Morris Bober is a man of discipline, ethical rules, social duties and religious beliefs. Frank Alpine is a restless Italian drifter. His vision of failure arises from a moral judgement on his past. He lacks a clear sense of life. He is afflicted with a compulsive over-eagerness to arrive. He lives in a trap of guilt and failure. He learns from Morris Bober that the only way out of the trap is through clearer and nobler goals and the acquisition of the Jewish discipline of staying power and self-discipline. He undergoes the imposed discipline of the store and learns to emulate the example of the infinitely enduring grocer. Shmuel in *The Fixer* is also a man of discipline and law. He exhorts Bok to keep the Jewish laws in his heart. Bok discovers himself through sufferings and trials. He at last discovers that his personal identity is indistinguishable from his group identity.

Malamud’s fiction is based on a deep moral concern. Most of his characters have to discover or build their own moral laws. At the heart of these moral laws is responsibility. Situations and even objects become part of the moral landscape. His heroes are the downtrodden of the world and yet they have greater moral strength than their oppressors. For example Morris Bober in *The Assistant* is a poor grocer, but he is capable of love and service. He does what is good and right. Therefore he is morally stronger than the morally weak and materialistic neighbours, especially the selfish and money-minded Karp, the rival of Bober. Yakov Bok is also strengthened morally at last when he discovers his identity through sufferings and sense of responsibility. Commitment and responsibility are the hallmarks of Malamud’s heroes. They start with nothing, but later they grow stronger through discipline and moral
laws which are derived from or create responsibility toward another human being.

Discipline and law form important elements in the Hebraic culture. They were “the chosen people”, a blessing they enjoyed. To possess “the future world” which is not cheap, life is oriented toward rigorous fulfilment of the commandments. Judaism is a religion of instinctual renunciation. Hebrews pride themselves on their restraint and their self-control. They interpret their renunciation as a mark of higher spirituality. The Torah, or the law is the heritage of the Jewish people and serves as the structure of Judaism. It contains the Ten Commandments and the basic laws of Judaism. The heart of the Pentateuch is a confession of faith, which the worshipper is to make when he presents the first fruits of the harvest at the sanctuary:

My ancestor was a wandering Aramean, a homeless refugee, who took his family to Egypt to live. They were few in number when they went there, but they became a large and powerful nation. The Egyptians treated us harshly and forced us to work as slaves. Then we cried out for help to the Lord, the God of our ancestors. He heard us and saw our suffering, hardship and misery. By his great power and strength, he rescued us from Egypt. He worked miracles and wonders, and caused terrifying things to happen. He brought us here and gave us this rich and fertile land. So now I bring to the Lord the first part of the harvest that he has given me. (Deut. 26:5-10)

Job is a man of uprightness and discipline. He faithfully adheres to God’s statutes. It is accounted that each of his sons periodically held a nonreligious feast, possibly a birthday celebration. At the conclusion of each round of feasting Job offered burnt offerings, atoning sacrifices, for all his children, just in case any of them had cursed God in their hearts. Before
making the sacrifices he sent servants to make sure that his children were ritually cleansed for the solemn occasion of offering up sacrifices for expiation. As the head of the family, he interceded for each member lest any thought disrupt their relationship with God. Thus Job lived an exemplary and disciplined life.

Morris Bober in *The Assistant* says, “Others had more sense; the Jews accepted”. Morris Bober also is a man of discipline. He lives the law, keeping up the true spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. Malamud sees a holy and disciplined man or a “chosen man” in Morris Bober. Bober says:

My father used to say to be a Jew all you need is a good heart. / What do you say?/ The important thing is the Torah. This is the law—a Jew must believe in the law .... I don’t worry about Kosher, which is to me old-fashioned. What I worry is to follow the Jewish law .... But they will tell me, and I will believe them, if I forget the Law. This means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. (124)

Later Bober says: “If a Jew forgets the law, he is not a good Jew, and not a good man” (125). Bober and Frank are the grocer and the assistant, father and son, aggressor and victim, missionary and convert even sacrifice and priest. Frank is trapped in an endless circle of uncertain origin and he lacks a clear sense of where he is going. This trap is a fatal circle of guilt and failure. The only way out of the trap is through self-discipline to attain the goal. He gets initiated under the guardianship and guidance of Morris Bober, and his daughter Helen. The guilt-ridden Alpine falls in love with Helen. Frank begins to work in Bober’s dingy store as an act of expiation for the sins he has committed against Bober and his daughter Helen. Service in the store begins as atonement—twelve hours a day, seven days a week virtually without pay. Thus we see that Frank Alpine learns from Morris the true spirit of the law,
that is to do right, to be honest, to do good and to learn through suffering. Morris Bober teaches him the duties and ethical structures that separate man from beast. For this he must suffer; and to suffer for the law is to suffer for others. He suffers for a specific goal, Helen. She tells him he must develop “discipline” of a Jew. For a Jew suffering is life and law. He has a covenant with his God and in the nature of all such agreements, he breaks the rules and pays for his transgressions. To know the rules, the discipline of the Jew, to keep and break them and then to pay for breaking them is human experience for him. To be a Jew is to understand the suffering that God puts into the lives of all men. This understanding leads to goodness which further takes the Jew to a disciplined life. This idea is a fascination for him: “Often since the time Helen had been in his room he had recalled her remark that he must discipline himself and wondered why he had been so moved by the word, why it should now bang around his head like a stick against a drum” (157). Later when Morris dies, Frank Alpine does step into his shoes, the son displacing the father. He becomes Morris Bober—a full fledged Jew, keeping up the discipline and the law.

Another important theme in Malamud is the theme of conversion. His protagonists begin as cowards or schlemiels. They pass through a lot of trials and suffering. Through suffering, they are purified. In the end, a total transformation takes place in the protagonists. Max F. Schulz in the article “Mythic Proletarians” says that one of the persistent themes of Malamud’s novels is the conversion of the hero (187). The Malamud hero at first determines to make his fortune. Later his selfish search for gain or personal satisfaction metamorphoses into a social and ritualistic quest which ends in a kind of revival of spirit. The hero who begins as a self-server involuntarily assumes the role of redeemer. The protagonist often journeys from his previous abode to a moral state. He at first transgresses against the moral and legal code, setting his desires above the law and needs of the land. Yet he eventually wins a moral victory over his old self through his conversion to concern for the
In the Hebraic tradition, conversion means the process of turning to God, of being turned to God. It does not mean random experiences of transcendence, but rather the process whereby we are drawn to integrate our experience of grace into our daily life. The idea of conversion is usually expressed by the Hebrew word that means “turn,” frequently used in prophetic admonitions addressed to Israel. Jeremiah exhorts: “The Lord says, “People of Israel, if you want to turn, then; /Turn back to me .... Keep your covenant with me, your /Lord, and dedicate yourselves to me” (4:1-4). The Hebrew idea of conversion means: to seek Yahweh, to humble oneself, to direct one’s heart to Yahweh, to seek good, to hate evil and to love good, to learn to do good, to obey the laws, to acquire a new heart, to circumcise one’s heart etc. The abundance of such metaphors shows that conversion is conceived of as a genuine interior change of attitude that issues in a revolution in personal conduct. In ancient Hebraic tradition, the meaning of faith is to turn to God. As prophet Jeremiah wanders through the potter’s street, the thought strikes him that as the potter shapes and reshapes the clay, Yahweh who made Israel can unmake and remake her. If she will not co-operate, He will bring about the collapse of the nation. Therefore he laments: “Return, everyone from his evil way and amend your ways and doings” (18:11). The same message is repeated by John the Baptist too, while preaching the Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, says: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matt3:2).

Annice Callahan in her article “Conversion in Daily Life” observes that to be human means to be oriented to God. The call to conversion is a call to
transformation, a call to self-transcendence and growth in self-appropriation. Self-transcendence has to do with the purification of human desire. It is the achievement of conscious intentionality, that is, experiencing, understanding, and moving towards the true and the good. According to Annice Callahan, four levels of conversion can be distinguished: intellectual, moral, religious, and psychic (334). These four levels are interrelated. When we move from our loved view to another view, it is the beginning of the intellectual conversion. Gradually we turn to psychic conversion, as we become conscious of our affections and begin to relate them to each other. Torn by the conflict, we finally move beyond a life based on comfort and convenience to a life of conviction, or we move from satisfaction to values. This is moral conversion. In the end as we identify ourselves with our new view, religious conversion takes place. Callahan says:

Religious experience has been the point of departure. Examples of each attitude of heart have been taken from the Judeo-Christian tradition: biblical, historical, and contemporary models of the conversion process. Our call to conversion is a call to turn to God in the midst of this world. It means learning how to listen to our hearts, to God, and to the hearts of others. It is a call to deepen our life of faith, hope and love, our life for others lived in the spirit of God. (342)

The conversion process is described as a transit of consciousness. Jon Alexander in his "Job Considered as a Conversion Account" points out four stages in the American Conversion Experience. Accordingly, The Book of Job can be divided into four sections corresponding to the four stages of the transit: complacency shattered, the struggle between two worlds, the miraculous moment, and the new consciousness (129). Before the tempest crushed Job, he is described as blameless and upright, a prosperous patriarch living with his numerically perfect family, attendants and flocks. But somehow Job seems
uneasy and scrupulous. After his children's banquets, he offers sacrifices. The law of retribution seems to govern his moral world. His scrupulosity and his fail-safe sacrifices for his sons are integral parts of his complacent world view. This world view is shattered by four catastrophes that strip him of his wealth and children. He responds by mourning. Then a fifth catastrophe, loathsome sores, afflicts him and he is compelled to withdraw from society to dust and ashes.

In the next stage, the struggle between two worlds begins. The catastrophic misfortunes are unjustified and foreign to Job's view. The two scenes in heaven establish the truth of Job's repeated assertion that he has done nothing to warrant these disasters. Job is mentally distraught, physically sick, and even tempted to take his life. This temptation to commit suicide and Job's cursing God are indications of the struggle between two worlds. Although he rejects suicide, he repeats his wish for death again and again in his speeches. Job's miraculous moment is described as a theophany in which God addresses Job with a challenge to face him. He gets a new consciousness that replaces his complacent consciousness. The mental process in his miraculous moment is similar to conversion. William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* says that conversion is the shifting of one's habitual center of personal energy so that ideas previously peripheral become central. Job's life after he attained his new consciousness is brief. He is portrayed as reunited with his family, a restored patriarch with double the earlier number of and flocks, sons and three beautiful daughters who are given an inheritance. Job intercedes for his friends. He reunites with his family. All these indicate that he has gained a degree of forgiveness and trust beyond that of his scrupulous, complacent consciousness. It takes very little reading to realize that the strength to forgive and trust, to work and love again, is no small grace.

Though God takes pride in such a servant, he allows Satan to test him with the warning that he should not kill him. Although Job experiences
excruciating suffering, he has persevered until he has found full reconciliation with Yahweh. Throughout the entire ordeal Job has shown that he serves Yahweh from a pure heart. But he holds on to the belief that he is innocent. Elihu and the other three friends accuse him of pride. Finally when God gives him a glimpse of himself and talks to him from the whirlwind he submits himself to him totally. His reconciliation becomes a total conversion. When he is given an opportunity, he mercifully prays for his three friends, though their tirades have increased his suffering. This indicates that Job has gained spiritual authority. His conversion changes all his relationships. His relatives and neighbours come and dine with him in a renewal of their friendship and they participate in his restoration by giving him gifts. Also as an expression of his love and goodness, Yahweh restores Job’s wealth and his family.

In *The Assistant*, Malamud makes the Jewish concept of conversion a convincing basis for the theme and action of the novel. Frank’s conversion to Judaism will presumably include the acceptance of the prophetic and social values of that religion. Malamud’s protagonists are simple as the Israelites were a simple people. At first, Frank, the simple and poor protagonist, does not know Morris, the Jew. As Israel was unfaithful to God, Frank too robs Morris, just because he is a Jew. More and more Morris shows himself to Frank. Morris, though poor, has staunch faith in the traditional values of honesty and truth. Frank, on the other hand suggests to Morris to try a couple of tricks and to make more profit: “Why don’t you try a couple of those tricks yourself Morris? Your amount of profit is small” (84). But Morris is a man of faith and morality and is surprised at the suggestion: “Why should I steal from my customers? . . . When a man is honest he don’t worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel” (84). Here they both understand each other. Frank now understands thoroughly what it is to be a Jew. On the other hand Morris is reminded once again of his role as a prophet to teach Frank of God’s love and His Commandments. As God was planning to save all men through Israel, Morris too plans to adopt Frank as his own son and save him
from the pit of ignorance and darkness. He acts as though he has the intuition that Frank may have to assist the store and his family in the years to come. Therefore Morris, like the ancient prophets, tries to redeem Frank and to give him a new life by giving spiritual nourishment through his timely exhortations. Frank would have to grow and suffer and learn, as it was with the Israelites.

The regeneration of Frank Alpine, his literal and symbolic conversion to the Jewish faith, is one of the central themes of *The Assistant*. The protagonist in the book is Frank Alpine. The week after Frank was born, his mother died. He never saw her face. Father also left him leaving him an orphan. Therefore he was raised in an orphan's home. When he was eight, they sent him to a tough family. He ran away from there ten times. Frank says: "What do you expect to happen after all of that?" (37). He confides to Morris Bober that he wants to change his life. But he does not know how. Now he is twenty five, but he looks older. He was brought up as a Catholic, but he no longer believes in that religion. He has never known love, success or satisfaction. He is a born loser. He says:

I have been close to some wonderful things — jobs for instance, education, women, but sooner or later everything I think is worth having gets away from me in some way or other. I work like a mule for what I want, and just when it looks like I am going to get it I make some kind of a stupid move, and everything that is just about nailed down tight blows up in my face .... With me one wrong thing leads to another and it ends in a trap. I want the moon so all I get is cheese. (36)

He helps Ward Minogue, an acquaintance, rob the Jewish grocer. He willingly participates in the robbery because his victim is a Jew for whom he does not need feel sympathy. However, Frank Alpine trembles, which reveals his inner conflict at the crime. Frank’s dismay shows the on-going thematic
conflict in his new life. It reveals his real attitude toward the grocer. When Ward strikes the old man Frank gives Bober a cup of water and he leans against the sink to control his trembling. When Ward raises his gun, Frank stands “staring into the mirror, waving frantically his black eyes bulging”(25). He has conflicting feelings about goodness. He thinks about St. Francis. He says to Sam: “Every time I read about somebody like him I get a feeling inside of me I have to fight to keep from crying. He was born good which is a talent if you have it” (31). He leans “against the sink, cleaning his fingernails with a match stick”(25). In the cracked mirror Frank sees his distorted reflection because “every so often he turned to stare into it”(25). Through the cracked mirror, he can see only his distorted self. Frank’s mind is like a cracked mirror. He has a conflict in the mind. The thought of St. Francis of Assissi, is on one side; the thought of participation in the theft is on the other side. He is in the middle. He trembles seeing his true self. The other man aims the gun at the grocer’s mouth. Frank flutters his hand calling the other. They meet at the center of the room. Obviously Frank does not want to do the crime. He tries to change the other, but Frank is forced into this robbery. The other is heard saying no. “At the table he whacked the grocer across the face”(26) Morris moans. Frank Alpine quickly rinses a cup and fills it with water. He gives it to the grocer, “spilling some on his apron as he raised the cup to his lips”(26). Malamud here brings together a seasoned robber and a fresh hand robber and shows the difference. Before this incident Malamud presented Frank with the haunting reveries of St. Francis of Assissi. Frank is good at heart. Though circumstances force him to take part in the crime, his mind is still not in it. The robber himself gives water to the robbed. Frank is here the “good and repentant thief” on the cross. An act of charity in time is the penalty of all the crimes. Witnessing the sufferings of the grocer, Frank gulps down the water. Once more Malamud caricatures Frank Alpine into a schlemiel: “He went hurriedly through the drawers of an old bureau in the room, and on hands and knees searched under the couch ... but came up with nothing”(26). Frank goes to the other one and forbids. But he “elbowed him aside”. He talks for
the oppressed: "That's all the dough he has, let's beat it" (26). Morris goes on saying: "I am a poor man" (26). But he has no ear to hear. He strikes him on the head. Frank looks into the mirror and waves "frantically, his black eyes bulging". Malamud presents here the intensity of his suffering through his thoughts:

Morris saw the blow descend and felt sick of himself; of soured expectations, endless frustration, the years gone up in smoke, he could not begin to count how many. He had hoped for much in America and got little .... fell without a cry. The end fitted the day. It was his luck, others had better. (26-27)

As for Frank Alpine, he is driven into this, in order to satisfy his hunger, the basic need in what Maslow calls a "hierarchy of needs". According to "Maslow's hierarchy of needs," man is guided and controlled by his needs, which can be represented by the rungs of a ladder. The first rung represents the basic need of man, and the most fundamental is food, the denial of which, according to Maslow, makes man go astray. Frank's nervousness and trembling is suggestive of the conflict between his inferior emotions and the higher consciousness which he ultimately becomes. The partnership in the robbery is not at all voluntary, which is evident throughout the robbery. In the act of giving a glass of water to the thirsty on time, Frank shows himself to be already in the process of conversion.

In fact Frank had argued with Ward Minogue about the uselessness of robbing a poor Jew, though prompted by Ward, he is finally driven into it. But his conscience pricks and he fails in the attempt to rob Bober. Yet afterwards he visits the site and makes amends by seeking work in the store and assisting Bober in every work. His background as a Catholic and the love of St. Francis, prick his conscience and he atones for his crime doing charity. Morris's lying in bed with a bandaged head, Ida's massive nervousness, and
the meager though decent job of Helen necessitate Frank’s lingering over the store. He stands vacantly on Sam Pearl’s corner. He wanders around Sam-Carp-Morris lane. Sometimes he stares at the closed door of Morris’s store. He sighs at times revealing the repentance in his heart. He simply walks around. When Helen pastes a paper saying her father is not well, Frank stares at it. Malamud gives a clear picture of Frank: “He was young, dark-bearded, wore an old brown rain-stained hat, cracked patent leather shoes and a long black overcoat that looked as if it had been lived in. He was tall”(29). This is the picture of St. Francis of Assissi, as it is given in his Biography. Frank meaning Francis, and Assistant for Assissi make him come close to Francis of Assissi. Frank has a long way to go to reach anywhere near St. Francis of Assissi mentally and spiritually. He sits with Sam Pearl at the fountain lost in thoughts. He seems to be under stress, sighs much, and mutters to himself. He seems to be in inner conflict. Sometimes he seems to be relaxed, and reconciled with himself. Malamud clearly brings out how the inner conflict in man makes him melancholy and the light in him makes him relaxed. Though Sam suggests to get a chauffeur’s license, he stays around looking for someone else. But when Ida reopens the store, Frank disappears and the next morning he emerges bleary and unhappy. “He looks half in his grave.” Sam thought, "God knows what hole he slept in last night”(30).

Frank reads a book while stirring a coffee. He stares at the picture of St. Francis of Assissi. He is a thin faced dark-bearded monk in a coarse brown garment. He stands barefooted. His skinny hairy hands are raised to a flock of birds. When Frank was small, a priest used to tell different story about St. Francis. They are very clear to him. But the way Frank looks at the story is different. For Frank St. Francis is a hero of his soul. So everything of St. Francis, his poverty, his words, and his living are imitated by Frank. Certainly, Alpine lacks this talent and he cannot comprehend St. Francis and his own feelings about the saint. Yet he sees that Bober’s life, like that of St. Francis, is one of both poverty and goodness. These are the two moral
standards he is in search of. He is attracted towards Morris’s endurance in the face of calamities, by his acceptance of life, with all its hardships, by his compassion and by his religion. He craves for this code to live by and to put an end to his aimlessness.

Frank is also attracted towards Bober’s daughter Helen. He gradually wins the friendship of father and daughter. They both teach him how to do better in life. Ashamed of his part in the robbery and sorry for Bober, he returns to help the old man. Once he begins his work as Morris’ assistant in the store, he begins at the same time his spiritual apprenticeship to Morris in his search for a new life. Morris Bober and Frank Alpine shift from their roles of store keeper and assistant to their purer religious selves, teacher and novice. For Malamud, this quest for a new life is to be self-born, in and through relationship with another. The thematic center of the novel is here. The Assistant becomes the grocer and something of the same kind of exchange occurs on the spiritual level too. Frank confides everything to Bober, he says: “I’ve often tried to change the way things workout for me but I don’t know how, even when I think I do. I have it in my heart to do more than I can remember (231).

But just instruction is not enough for conversion. Frank is not the man he once was. He has changed; but not completely. He is yet not in control of his urges. He steals meager sums from the small amounts in the grocery store. Morris fires him. Later when Bober becomes ill, he sneaks back into the store and becomes the assistant. Malamud once again gives him a chance to change his ways. For Malamud, personal distress and torment prove man’s prime means of consciousness and it is also the chief link between his Jews and Gentiles. Suffering is a means of purification and salvation. Malamud believes shared anguish should lead to mutual sympathy and brotherhood. According to Richard Astro and Jackson in The Fiction of Bernard Malamud:
How shared suffering, poverty, and sorrow can unify diverse beings is what Frank Alpine learns. He is the Italian Jew-hater and thief of *The Assistant* who robs grocer Morris Bober and then tries to expiate his crime.... As for Frank Alpine, he is not only repelled and attracted by the Jew he has victimized, but he is rendered equally uncertain by his confused glances at his own emerging self. (123)

To die to the old self is not an easy task. It needs years. But at his renewal, he learns what he must do and he is given the chance to do it. In Malamud’s world, the change comes only after all external assistance fades. The change for Frank takes place when he is thrown back entirely on his own resources. Instruction is a necessary step, but ultimately, he himself has to face the dark alone. Not until he is caught red handed in the act of stealing, and not until his rash and foolish love affair drives Helen beyond his reach, does he arrive at a full understanding of the tragic pattern of his life and the basic goodness—Jewishness—of his latent self. This is the moment of his self-discovery. Later Bober catches pneumonia while shoveling snow and dies three days later. At his funeral, Frank is there attending the whole ceremony silently and voluntarily. He has totally changed. He is already dead to his old self. The death of his old self is suggestively depicted by Malamud:

*Then the diggers began to push in the loose earth around the grave and as it fell on the coffin the mourners wept aloud. Helen tossed in a rose. Frank, standing close to the edge of the grave, leaned forward to see where the flower fell. He lost his balance, and though railing his arms, landed feet first on the Coffin. Helen turned her head away. Ida wailed. ... Frank scrambled out of the grave, helped by the diggers. I spoiled the funeral, he thought. He felt pity on the world for harbouring him. (231)*
Frank’s descent into Bober’s grave marks Frank’s death as an uncommitted wanderer and his rebirth as Bober’s spiritual son — one who lives by the law. After the funeral he goes back to the store. He assumes the total responsibility of the store. He has found his personal identity in the tribe. He discovers that his personal identity is indistinguishable from his group identity. One is discovered in the process of discovering the other. The group soul can be discovered only when one takes up the responsibility. Morris Bober has died, his dream of college education for his daughter apparently buried in his coffin. To give his life meaning, Frank works day and night, dedicates himself, and sends Helen to college. He breaks out his personal hell and enters the divine “Service.” Morris gives to Frank only a barren store and the holy tradition of suffering for others with discipline, endurance and with hope. In return, he gives meaning to Bober’s life. Helen, half asleep, thinks of the assistant:

It was a strange thing about people—they could look the same but be different. He had been one thing, low dirty, but because of something in himself — something she couldn’t define, a memory perhaps, an ideal he might have forgotten and then remembered — he had changed into somebody else, no longer what he had been. She should have recognized it before .... Since he has changed in his heart, he owes me nothing. (243)

Frank has undergone total conversion. He identifies himself with Morris and his law. He is visited by the Polish Lady, Nick, Breitbart, the peddler and the drunken woman. To keep from getting nervous he takes out the Bible and reads. He sees St. Francis, as he reads. Then one day he goes to the hospital and gets circumcised: “One day in April, Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself
around with a pain between the legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After passover he became a Jew" (246). When at last Frank is circumcised and becomes a Jew, he ritually confirms the psychic conversion. This event is much more than a ritual confirmation. That it takes place in April and he becomes a Jew after the passover, is significant. He gets circumcised in April, the season of renewal and he becomes a Jew after passover, the season of deliverance. The circumcision is the mark of the Jew’s covenant with God — his acceptance of the Yoke of the law. It is also the symbol of his submission to a disciplined life dedicated to the fulfillment of God’s commandments. He has been converted from “uncircumcised dog,” from undisciplined beast to circumcised Jew, the “man of stern morality.” Malamud here symbolically contrives the fusion of two religions that were in enmity for centuries by converting Frank, a Catholic, into a committed brotherhood with the people of the covenant, the Jews.

The theme of conversion recurs in its various aspects in The Fixer too. Yakov Bok unlike Frank Alpine, is born Jew. Like every Jew, Yakov too is a prisoner of poverty, and injustice. He is thirty. His wife runs off with another man. He is not a believer but has some vague humanistic ideas which have been picked up from reading of Spinoza. Fed up with the forced "chosen" fate of the Jew, he leaves the poor Shtetl. With the notion of making money to get to America, he goes to the nearest city Kiev. Thus friendless, jobless, nearly penniless, and Godless, concealing his religion, he begins his life in Kiev city. His crossing of the Dnieper marks his final break with his past life and bears symbolic significance. The freezing black water with the black, and night with half moon marks the impending doom in store for him. When the anti-Semitic boatman starts his tirade against the Jews, his bag of prayer things falls down into the river.

With the dream of forging a new life, he leaves his past, his culture and his God. This drift from the spiritual and moral influences is all the more
predominant when he gets into the prison. Bok’s isolation and intense suffering in the prison form the pivotal point of the action of the narrative. Fate has condemned the starving Bok to a stinking, freezing cell in a Russian prison. Malamud here exaggerates Bok’s experience to the point of distortion through the use of peculiar dreams and hallucinations that it becomes caricature. But from these dreams and fantasies, he derives strength and clarity. These dreams and hallucinations exhibit truths at a subconscious level, and the truths enable Bok to sublimate his misery and endure. Bok becomes conscious of his personal righteousness and he begins to place some principles behind his endurance. He becomes brave enough to read openly the smuggled Talmud in prison. He never yields to the whims of the power structure which is represented by Grubeshov, Father Anastasy and the Tzar. Bibikov, who knows that Bok is innocent, tries to collect the facts and reasons which are ignored by the power structure. Bok always demands indictment. He shouts his innocence in vain. When Raisl, who had cuckolded and deserted him earlier, comes to visit him in the prison, he recalls:

Without a living where can you go? We went nowhere. By now it was coming to six years that we were married and still had no children. I said nothing but I was, in my heart a disappointed man. Who could I look in the face? .... At first I cursed her like somebody in the Bible curses his whorish wife. ‘May she keep her miscarrying womb and dry breasts.’ But now I look at it like this: She had tied herself to the wrong future. (192-93)

Presently both Bok and Raisl are together, sharing, and loving. She tells him what all sufferings she had undergone: “I was barren. I ran in every direction. I flung myself against trees. I tore at my dry breasts and cursed my empty tomb”(257). He tells her “I am innocent”. She weeps. He asks “What are you crying for?” She says “For you, for me, for the world”. Her tears have a cleansing and redeeming effect. He feels sorry for her. He says:
I’ve thought about our life from beginning to end and I can’t blame you for more than I blame myself. Some people have to make the same mistake seven times before they know they’ve made it. That’s my type and I’m sorry... I’ve suffered in this prison and I’m not the same man I once was. (259)

Yakov now agrees to what she asks. He acknowledges that the child is his, so that it may have a name, so that Raisl may be accepted back among her people. He says with a sigh: “I’ll write you a paper that the child’s mine”(261). Later he could answer to a question “Are you a father?” : “With all my heart”. Thus after an initial alienation and agnosticism he has earned the right to suffer for others. He begins to recognize that he is responsible for all his people, whose trials and traditions Yakov had mocked by his rejection. Here the conversion process in him is set going. Bok is more of a father figure at the end than the Tzar. His growth is gradual and painful. In the prison though initially he merely tolerates Kogin, gradually he sympathizes with him who complains about his thankless and good-for-nothing son. This ability to sympathize comes from his accepting suffering on behalf of all other Jews, Shmuel, Raisl, and her son. In fact he has acquired this ability to suffer for others, after much pain and difficulties and the resultant tremendous internal growth. His acceptance of Chaim (life), the illegitimate son of Raisl (Israel), is the most painful part of his conversion. This is also a kind of symbolic form of conversion. Physically though the Tzar fathers his hemophiliac son, he fails symbolically to father his subjects, even the most miserable, who depend on him as children do a father. By shooting the Tzar in his dream, Bok acts on behalf of all other oppressed persons. He says: “One thing I’ve learned — there’s no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew”(299). Thus Bok fixes history by fixing a man who had already dead to human feelings and the needs of his dependent subjects. At the end he is aware of his chosen nature: to be a Jew is to suffer for it. Since he has undergone the test as a Jew and as an
individual, he emerges with his spirit and mind alive. He acquires a moral dignity. Alan Warren Friedman in his article “The Hero as Schnook” says:

It hurts, it hurts mightily, but Yakov hopes .... At the end, heading defiantly for the trial he has so long demanded, Yakov clearly has achieved the searing recognition and acceptance of self and world which is modern man’s equivalent for the anagnorisis of the traditional tragic hero. (302)

Thus we see that Yakov Bok learns through suffering and gets finally converted. He is one of the oppressed and so he has been made to rot in prison. As a result, he learns a historical necessity: to be a Jew is to suffer for it. He emerges with his spirit and mind alive. He acquires a moral identity. He emerges in the end triumphant, because he has emerged with a complete recognition of his moral identity and his dignity. Malamud takes Yakov Bok through the valleys and recesses of humiliation and intense suffering in actual prison to bring him back to the very Jewishness that he always conceals from others. This becoming is true conversion in the Hebraic sense.

The tragic overtones in Malamud’s conception of Jewish life can be experienced in the stories collected in “The Magic Barrel.” The theme of Hebraic conversion appears here also. The stories take place in bleak rooms where characters are the victims of pain and suffering and finally they emerge victorious with some kind of moral perceptions. Malamud’s Jews in the short stories are a kind of metaphor for human possibilities and promises. Malamud very skillfully catches the moment of moral crisis when his characters transcend their suffering to spiritual altitudes knowing the "chosen" aspect of their race and their identity as Jews. Through his short stories, he seems to suggest that the Jew’s symbolic value is in his suffering. According to Mark Goldman, "the moral value of this view extends to all men, and Malamud even satirizes in a story like 'Angel Levine' the Jew as privileged sufferer"
Malamud stresses the Jew's symbolic and moral meaning in the stories: "Where tragedy follows man's fate, comedy, tries to correct his folly, and Malamud's comic vision returns man to himself and society" (154).

In the short story "The Mourners," Kessler, the lonely reprobate betrays hearth and home and still he is unrepentant. After many years he becomes a lonely rag doll, a former egg candler, who just ekes out his livelihood. He lives in an old tenement like all other Jews. Then there appears a rival, Ignace, like Karp in The Assistant. Ignace tries to get Kessler out from the tenement. Both are caricatured as typical Schlemiels. Ignace and the landlord try many games to evict him. The ways they use are absurd. Kessler barricades himself in his flat. Ignace and Gruber use a pass key to enter into the apartment. They see Kessler sitting on the floor in the traditional mourning posture of the religious Jew:

His eyes were downcast, and his body swayed slowly sideways. As the landlord talked on, the old man was thinking of what had whirléd through his mind as he sat out on the side walk in the falling snow. He has thought through his miserable life, remembering how, as a young man, he had abandoned his family, walking out on his wife and three innocent children, without even in some way attempting to provide for them, without in all the intervening years--so God help him--once trying to discover if they were dead or alive. How is so short a life, could a man do so much wrong? This thought smote him to the heart and he recall the past without end and moaned and tore at his flesh with his finger nails. (25)

From reprobate as caricature, Kessler has turned through suffering and remorse to conversion. It is for his past that he mourns. But Gruber thinks that Kessler has received some bad news. He is suspicious. But Kessler mourns for
Gruber now, for his uncharitable and cruel deeds. With a contrite heart, Gruber thinks of the pain and torture he has inflicted on Kessler. He tears the sheet of Kessler's bed, wraps it around his bulk and sits on the floor to mourn. Gruber finds the room "clean, drenched in daylight and fragrance" (26). Kessler is not mourning for himself but for all the reprobates or the lost sheep. Thus he suffers for others. Thus ultimately he himself has taken the step to salvation. From caricature he has risen to allegory.

The themes of conversion and new life can be found in the story "Pictures of Fidelman". Susskind is the conscience of Fidelman. He steals the manuscript and says that he has done a favour. Susskind says to Fidelman over and over that he is not an artist and he is not a critic. He advises him to be himself and to reveal his identity. Fidelman is awakened and enlightened in the end. He gets self knowledge and achieves salvation. So he is able to tell Susskind "All is forgiven "(37).

The story "Glass Blower of Venice" finds Fidelman in Venice where he earns his living by ferrying passengers on his back across the river. Then one day he seduces an Italian woman Margheretta. Afterwards he becomes the friend of Beppo, a glass blower, the husband of Margheretta. Beppo teaches Fidelman a craft and says: "Don't waste your life doing what you can not do .... After twenty years, if the rooster has not crowed, she should know she is a hen"(198). Finally Beppo directs Fidelman towards the future: “if you can't invent art, invent life”? (199). Fidelman gives Beppo back to his wife. In the last lines we are told that “Fidelman sailed from Venice on a Portuguese freighter " and that " in America he worked as a craftsman and loved men and women." In the end he is capable of self sacrifice and loving others.

Fidelman at first is self centered and wants to seek his own fortune and so leaves his family and goes to Italy. During his strayed life, he gets the knowledge that his sister Bessie is in death bed. He is able to meet her before
her death. When he paints the mother and son, Esmeralda comments: “It's as though you were trying to paint yourself into your mother's arms” (122). He craves for a mother's affection and love. At least he is able to meet his sister and achieves his own salvation. Leslie Field in the essay “Portrait of the Artist as Schlemiel” says:

Pictures of Fidelman, a picaresque Bildungsroman, is an allegory of the artistic and moral life with the protagonist as moral life, with the protagonist as bungler, scapegoat, sufferer cad, pretender, loser, prisoner, innocent abroad or schlemiel. He is a Leopard Bloom of many false starts beset by many pitfalls, a man who is hit not only by the garbage but the garbage can as well—yet one who seems to win through and may gain salvation in the end by giving rather than taking, by rejecting lust for love, by abandoning the pretenses or art for the honesty of craftsmanship (129).

In each of the stories, Arther Fidelman is trapped and nailed and caricatured on his way to esthetic Calvary. The stories are the caricatures of the six Stations of the Cross. We can trace the roles of both Jesus and Judas, betrayed and betrayer. Finally the protagonist is saved. Malamud presents a compassionate vision of the world through caricatures in his stories. He is primarily a more traditional novelist of social and psychological behaviour. He has succeeded in universalizing his Jewishness. "Pictures of Fidelman" is a success as allegory. Fidelman can be seen progressing down and out-to salvation. Robert Scholes in "Portrait of the Artist as Escapes-Goat" says: "He [Fidelman] becomes an escape-goat" (49) by progressing down and out-to salvation. Rince Winegarten in “Malamud’s Head” says:

The very idea of Rembrandt's hat makes us think of artistic stature, of the highest accomplishment and most moving
expression of humane understanding in art. At the same time there is something quickly humorous about the hat considered in itself, distinct from the artists head, and something grotesque in the thought that there might be any artist living today whom such a symbolically grand hat would fit. (99)

In "Rembrandt's Hat," there is a dispute over a hat between an art historian and an elder colleague. He compares the colleague's cap to Rembrandt's hat. But the art historian fails to hit the point, making himself a caricature. Tension grows between them. But the light in him resurrects and he is enlightened to comprehend that he has been rude to behave so. He starts to think himself into the place of the frustrated and humiliated sculptor and he repents. A reconciliation takes place. Malamud seems to say that man is liable to make mistakes but it can be rectified by the insight that is given to him as a gift. Here the author caricatures the characters showing the absurdity of the misguided aspirations of modern anti-humanist art and the self-dissatisfaction of the author himself.

Malamud's fictional works are replete also with the themes of compassion, redemption, new life, the potential of meaningful suffering and self-sacrifice, which can be traced back to the Hebriac tradition. It is a tradition of mutual responsibility, ever regarding himself as his "brother's keeper". This biblical spirit was there in Malamud's mind when he started his writings. He follows the values of the old prophets like Amos and Hosea who emphasize universal justice, righteousness, love and compassion as the most important principles of moral life. He projects a moral vision in his works and takes a compassionate view of the suffering of man. He is compassionate towards the suffering Jew whose constant suffering has enhanced the value of compassion and charity. He is interested in capturing the spirit of Jewish life and moral experience seen in suffering and compassion. In an interview with Joseph Wershba, Malamud becomes edgy with emotion at one point and he says:
"The suffering of the Jews is a distinct thing for me" (5). Malamud is very much concerned about the degradation and loss of human dignity in the modern world. He believes that only compassion can redeem the modern man.

In his acceptance address of the National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel* he reveals his anguish and compassion at the deceitful devaluation of man. He says: "I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man" (14). In his interview with Haskan Frankel Malamud explains the credo of his philosophy. He says: "My work, all of it is an idea of dedication to the human" (21). His intense compassion for man informs his vision. It is in defense of the human that his fiction prescribes the value of compassion. He also believes that suffering acquires meaning and significance only in relation to compassion. Granville Hicks records in *Conversations with Bernard Malamud* that when the National Book Award to Malamud was announced the judges said: "The fiction prize is awarded to Bernard Malamud for *The Magic Barrel*, a work radiant with personal vision. Compassionate and profound in its wry humour, it captures the poetry of human relationships at the point where imagination and reality meet" (13). In *The Assistant* Morris Bober regards Frank Alpine as his own son despite his innumerable sins and offenses. He suffers for Frank. Yakov Bok forgets and forgives the sins of his wife and accepts her illegitimate son as his own.

Malamud's interest in the theme of love and compassion too has its origin in the Hebraic tradition. Yahweh of the ancient Jews is the manifestation of love and compassion. "The Yahweh is a righteous, loving and merciful God who commands men to behave with brotherly love and show compassion for the oppressed" (*Micah* 6:8). The central experience of the prophet Amos is a symbol revealing Yahweh's personal love for Israel even in the face of her gross failings. Yahweh is not pleased with mere offerings and rituals. Amos affirms that his people's loyalty is shown through justice and righteousness. He exhorts the Israelites that God's justice and righteousness are
so powerful that they will flow like a stream even in the dry season. He here tries to affirm that God’s people’s loyalty is shown not in elaborate and expressive ceremony, but in steady and just human relationships and righteousness in obedience to God’s will. In the book of Amos we read: “Stop your noisy songs; I do not want to listen to your harps/ Instead, let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry” (5:23-24).

The psalmist too praises the various qualities which unite in God. The deeds of the Lord make plain his goodness and his righteousness and his faithfulness to his covenant with Israel. His compassion is as wide as the world he created. The psalmist says: “The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in love, how good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures” (145:8-9). Yahweh’s people have suffered exile and dispersion because of their sins, but he will restore them. The prophet Ezekiel stresses compassion and love as the spiritual aspects of life.

God’s love and compassion abound in the prophetic literature: “To do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God” (Micah 6:8). The Lord says: “When Israel was a child, I loved him and called him out of Egypt as my son. I took my people up in my arms, I drew them to me with affection and love” (Hos. 11:1, 3, 4). He led Israel with cords of compassion. His love and compassion always grow warm and tender.

The prophet Hosea portrays the depth of God’s love and compassion. Hosea is fondly concerned about the covenant history of God’s people. He believes that the lack of faithfulness and loyalty is leading the nation to destruction at the hands of Assyria. Hosea is commanded to marry a “wife of harlotry” (Hos. 1:2). His wife Gomer begins to show harlotrous tendencies. The analogy between the relation of Hosea to Gomer and that of Yahweh to Israel is depicted in the book of Hosea. As a result of his bitter experience and the discovery that he still loves her (3:1), Hosea comes to the realization that his love is nothing compared to that of God for his faithless bride Israel. Despite all the waywardness, God loves Israel and reeducates her through discipline. Thus
God’s demand on Hosea is to demonstrate Israel’s harlotry. Hosea accepts the command, whether he likes it or not, to marry the harlot. Hosea marries the most loveless woman and God loves his most loveless people Israel. In spite of God’s prodigal love towards Israel, she turns against God.

In *The Book of Job* too we see this prodigal love of God in the restoration. God’s compassion and love for Job is proved at the end of the severe trial. Job is tried in the fire of suffering beyond his human strength. But God did not allow him to be doomed. Yahweh “blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning,” which is a demonstration of his parental grace and prodigal love for his faithful son. Yahweh showered his compassion and love by giving him a further hundred and forty years and allowed him to see his sons and his son’s sons for generations: “And Job died an old man, and full of days” (42: 17).

Closely related to the theme of love and compassion is the theme of prodigal love. In *The Assistant*, side by side with the theme of love and compassion, the same theme of prodigal love of a father to his son as seen in the story of “The Prodigal Son” in *The Bible* is seen in the Morris-Frank relation. When Frank confesses his involvement in the robbery, Morris reveals that he already has guessed it. Frank’s desire to confess matches Bober’s desire to forgive. In fact he has been looking forward to his return. When he confesses, he makes him not a servant but places him in the position of his honoured and loved son Ephraim. In spite of Frank’s strayed life, he is given the opportunity to come back to a new life of love and service in the store. He becomes compassion itself. He lives for others. He serves Bober’s orphaned wife and daughter. In *The Fixer* this prodigal love is experienced in the love of Yakov Bok to Raisl’s illegal son. Yakov for the sake of his unfaithful wife assumes the fatherhood of her son to save her from the pit of shame. Yakov Bok becomes compassion itself in the end. He cries for the
miseries that have to be endured by Shmuel and Raisl. He is ready to die for his race.

Malamud brings in the Hebraic account of Hosea—episode in the story, *The Fixer*, for the development of the plot. The passage Bok reads passionately is *Hosea* 2: 2-7 which is “prophetic for him” (Gerald Hoag 140). Yakov has reveries of the past. The Shtetl, the mistakes and failures of his life, Raisl, and Shmuel flash through his mind. As Sandy Cohen in *Trial by Love* says: “Yakov is fascinated with the story of Hosea, the man God commanded to marry a harlot, interpreted as Israel (Raisl)” (85). Yakov finds the experience of Hosea very close to his own:

He turned often to pages of Hosea and read with fascination the story of this man God had commanded to marry a harlot. The harlot, he had heard it said, was Israel, but the jealousy and anguish Hosea felt was that of a man whose wife had left his bed and board and gone whoring after strangers. (218)

Like Hosea Yakov too is forced to remain with Raisl till she runs after strangers. Yakov thinks: “At first I cursed her like somebody in the Bible curses his whorish wife. May she keep her miscarrying womb and dry breasts” (193). Yakov is very much interested in Hosea. He has heard that Hosea’s domestic crisis is just a metaphor for God’s covenant with Israel and her waywardness. But the metaphoric aspect does not interest him. What interests him is “the anguish of a man like himself betrayed by his wife, but one who can give marvelous voice to his suffering and humiliation” (Fisch 166).

Raisl like Hosea’s harlot, after many trials and tribulations, hardships and loss of her lovers, comes back to her husband. Later, as in the biblical promise (14: 1-8) of renewal, a new fruitfulness occurs, although Bok merely
assumes the fatherhood of Raisl's son. She has conceived in spite of God's warning to the Israelites: "Ephraim's glory shall fly away like a bird / no birth, no pregnancy, no conception!" (Hos. 9: 11). The difference is that Hosea is completely faithful to Yahweh. But Bok, though caricaturably assumes something like the role of prophet and leader, remains unfaithful to Yahweh. The Fields words, in Bernard Malamud and the Critical Essays: "Malamud's skill to raise a neutral anecdote to cosmic exemplum in the natural course of tale-telling," (140) is noteworthy here.

One of the most striking themes in Malamud's novels is father-son relationship or the search for a father, either real or spiritual, within or outside oneself. His characters are often orphans who can be seen leaving their original place in search of a father-figure. Leslie and Joyce Field in their Bernard Malamud: Collection of Critical Essays say:

Beginning with the Jewish patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob -- it finds a further expression in the story of Moses and the Exodus, and runs through the great history of Biblical Kings where, between the ambivalent Davids and Solomons, we have hostility and acceptance, hate and love. Overreaching all is the tension between the acceptance and the rejection of the Father of us all -- the one God. In this sense Malamud is a very Judaic writer who tends, ironically, to undercut the Christian themes that appear in his work. (6)

In Malamud's novels, often a son finds and replaces the father or the young hero replaces the old. When Morris Bober dies Frank Alpine takes the responsibilities of the tomb-like store and the burden of Bober's poor family. Relationship's of youthful son and aged father, the young and the old and the hero and the king abound in Malamud's fiction. The aged Shmuel is very much concerned with the young and restless Yakov Bok. The different levels of
father-son relationships in the novels serve to reinforce and to extend their meanings. This device increases the novel’s thematic implications. The father-son relationship involves many areas of man’s life, like family and society, the letter and the spirit of the law, morality and justice, idealism and materialism, love and duty. Its variations of the central pattern add many levels to the novel’s theme. The variations of the relationships also serve to embroider the central theme by thrusting it into almost every aspect of man’s life.

The history of Israel properly begins with the saga of the patriarchs (Gen. 12–50) from whom traditionally the twelve tribes of Israel were descended. The story of the Jewish patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-- is the story of the search for a “Father”. They were wanderers, toward a goal that Yahweh had set before them. The story of the journeys of Abraham, whose original name was Abram, from Ur to Haran, from Haran to Canaan, from Canaan to Egypt and then back to Canaan shows the mobility of people in the Hebraic tradition. This is recalled in the book of Deuteronomy, where it is said that the Father of Israel was “a wandering Aramean, a homeless refugee”(26:5). Abraham, leaving everything, migrates from Mesopotamia to Shechem, following God’s command. The journey is from promise to fulfillment. In the Hebraic tradition, Yahweh is a father-figure. He chooses Abraham for a purpose. A divine parental blessing is given to him. Yahweh promises that he will have a great posterity. At that time the older name Abram meaning “may the Father be exalted” was changed to Abraham meaning “father of a multitude” to signify the new relationship. This is also an everlasting covenant, unconditional in character. Yahweh gives the assurance that he will give the land as an “everlasting possession” and he will be “God” to Abraham and his descendants. In this covenant circumcision is not a condition, but is a physical sign of membership in the covenant community.
*Genesis* gives an account of this promise: “The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Leave your native land, your relatives, and your father’s home and go to a country that I am going to show you. I will give you many descendants and they will become a great nation’” (12:1-2). After this, Abraham had a vision and heard the Lord say to him, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I will shield you from danger and give you a great reward .... Look at the sky and try to count the stars; you will have as many descendants as that”(15:1-5). St Paul also gives an account of this promise. He says to the Galatians that God made a covenant with Abraham and promised to keep it. The law cannot break that covenant and cancel God’s promise. For if God’s gift depends on the law, it no longer depends on his promise. However it was because of his promise that God gave that gift to Abraham. The law was added in order to show what wrongdoing is, and “it was meant to last until the coming of Abraham’s descendant, to whom the promise was made”(3:16-19).

His son Isaac takes the place of his father afterwards. The birth of “Isaac,” the son of Abraham’s and Sarah’s old age, is reported in the Book of *Genesis*: “The Lord blessed Sarah, as he had promised, and she became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham when he was old... Abraham named him Isaac (21:1-2). Then the same drama is acted out all over again, this time with “Jacob”. Though Jacob tricks his twin brother out of their father’s final blessing, he is forced to flee to Haran. There, he is made to work hard and he suffers for the sake of the girl whom he loves dearly. Yet, through the providence and the fatherly concern of Yahweh, he succeeds in coming to possess great wealth. With Yahweh’s help, finally he comes back to the promised land, and takes possession of his father’s legacy.

The search for the father often leads to the motif of the journey, journey towards a goal. The search of a father-figure can be seen through the books of *Exodus* and *Numbers*. Moses also journeys towards the promised land. He delivers his people from Egypt and mediates the revealed law at Mount Sinai.
In Israel's legal tradition Moses is the celebrated lawgiver, in her prophetic tradition, the greatest of the prophets, and in her cultic tradition, the great mediator. The father-son love is portrayed in Hosea also. According to honoured tradition God’s election of Israel as his people was figuratively the birth of his “first-born son” (Exod. 4:22). Hosea spells out the meaning of that loving fatherhood. God called his son to be the agent of his divine purpose for the world. The relationship of Israel and God is one of father-son love:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos. 11:1-4)

It is notable that, not husband-wife love but father-son love is portrayed here. The marvel of divine love is God’s care and patience. He taught him to walk, lovingly carried him in his arms, healed him when ill, and fed him though the infant did not know it. The missionary journey of Paul is another example for the importance of journeying towards a goal. He was born at Tarsus in Asia minor, educated in Jerusalem, and converted on the road to Damascus.

The same father-son relation is the essence of the relation between God and Job in The Book of Job. We see an intimate relationship of the divine parent with his beloved son Job. Here Job is introduced as a man who is extraordinarily blessed and prosperous, upright and pious. He is pictured as a great potentate, not as an old man, but comparatively young: “We learnt our wisdom from gray-haired men, men born before your father” (15:10). He is outstanding for his goodness and blessed with great possessions. The Hebraic tradition places highest value on fearing Yahweh, asserting that it is the very
foundation for true wisdom. The fear of God is an expression found throughout the Hebraic literature and frequently in the Wisdom literature. Therefore Job approaches God reverently, filled with awe and deeply conscious of God’s parental love to him as to a son. As Job has the right filial relationship with God, He in return blesses him abundantly. God is proud of Job. With evident pleasure and even with a kind of pride Yahweh draws Satan’s attention to “my servant Job” (1:8) which is a title of great honour in the Hebraic tradition. The name Job meaning, “where is the divine parent?” itself places Job in the Hebraic tradition with its concept of God as divine parent. Even when he is allowed to be tortured and tormented by Satan, Job, taking all the freedom of the child of God, laments and complains with due reverence, inwardly searching the divine parent. Thus in happiness and tribulations alike, Job searches and reveres his divine parent and remains in his love.

In The Assistant. Frank Alpine, a wanderer like Abraham, leaves his homeland in search of a new life. He enters into father-son relationship with Morris Bober who is his spiritual strength. Bober too like Yahweh leads Frank into various recesses of his mind through his exhortations. The protagonist, Frank Alpine, is without home and without values. He is twenty five, and of Italian extraction. He is in search of a father. Morris is a sorrowing father seeking an emotional substitute for his dead son, Ephraim, a Hebraic name. The Hebraic patriarch Jacob, disregarding the primogeniture, blesses Joseph’s younger son Ephraim, indicating the eventual leadership of Ephraim among his tribes. As Jacob adopts Ephraim, Morris adopts Frank as his son. The St. Francis-Frank relationship of Frank’s childhood is an earlier father-son relationship. Frank says:

He was a great man. The way I look at it, it takes a certain kind of nerve to preach to birds .... He gave everything away that he owned, every cent, all his clothes off his back. He enjoyed to be
poor. He said poverty was a queen and he loved her like she was a beautiful woman .... Every time I read about somebody like him I get a feeling inside of me which I have to fight to keep from crying. He was born good, which is a talent if you have it.

(31)

The introduction of St. Francis, who is noted for his voluntary poverty, in connection with Frank is another strategy of Malamud. When Frank comes to Morris, he sees that Bober's life, like that of St. Francis is one of both poverty and goodness. He is attracted by his endurance, acceptance, compassion and by his religion. When Morris gets sick, Frank sneaks into the store operating it while he recuperates. Later when Morris catches pneumonia and dies, Frank, assuming the support of Mrs. Bober and Helen, works at an additional night job. He also assumes Morris's values, his honesty and his compassion. Thus Frank dies to his self and he is reborn as Bober's spiritual son. Frank accepts his situation and then becomes Morris Bober himself:

We also are reminded of the theme of the relationship of Moses and Israel in the Morris-Frank relationship, the name Morris being the English equivalent for Moses. While he works, he gets his spiritual nourishment from Bober. Bober instructs him as Moses had instructed the Israel. In the store, Morris Bober is the rabbi. Malamud raises Morris Bober to the status of the ancient patriarchs in the Hebraic tradition. Morris and Frank enter into a discussion on the Jewish experience. The characters shift from the roles of storekeeper and assistant to their pure religious selves, teacher and novice. The Jewish law means, Morris explains, "to do what is right, to be honest, to be good." As a religious novice is totally and wholly committed to the holy books, and hard works, Frank gets immersed purely in the work of the store. The store's ledgers become the holy books and the apron becomes the prayer shawl for Frank Alpine. Frank, the Italian, undergoes the discipline of the
In The Fixer, Malamud adapts the archetype of father-son relationship, and the youthful heroes replacing the aged, the primary expression of which are found in the Book of Job. In The Fixer the obvious father-son pair is Shmuel and Yakov Bok. Shmuel, Yakov’s father-in-law, plays the role Morris Bober plays in The Assistant. Shmuel is often presented as the spiritual guide to Yakov. He advises Yakov to remember God, and he speaks about the goodness of God. Shmuel helps Yakov and Raisl come together. He demonstrates that the Jew suffers historically and traditionally. But Yakov does not appreciate Shmuel’s view and his poverty. But suffering in the prison has taught him the truth and wisdom of Shmuel’s life. At the end he wants to live for Shmuel to fulfill his potentials. In the beginning of the novel we see them very much together as a parent-son pair. Later this is replaced by the relationship of Lebedev and Yakov. Lebedev, like a father, prepares a shelter for him and gives him a job in his brick factory. In the prison Yakov finds a parental figure in Bibikov who always tries to help him from the clutches of prison and injustice. Finally Yakov recognizes the parental figure in Tsar Nicholas II, his “Little Father”(298). As Yakov grows morally, his thoughts on fatherhood also change. He tells Bibikov, that in the heart he is a father. Though he is an orphan, he must become a father in his heart. He takes up the fatherhood of Raisl’s illegitimate son. Becoming a father implies that he will be responsible for the child.

Malamud has said in an interview that he wrote stories between novels “to breathe, and give myself time to think what’s in the neat book. Sometimes I’ll try out a character or situations similar to that in a new novel” (Stern 62). The themes of the novels can be seen in the stories. Malamud has said that he would use his stories as laboratories for characters and ideas which he would develop in a novel. The theme of the search for a father-son relationship can
be seen in the short stories. The “Last Mohican” presents the first picture of Fidelman. He appears as a self-confessed failure as a painter. He comes home to prepare a critical study of the renaissance painter Giotto. Malamud presents him on a journey in search of a father as other characters like Yakov Bok, Frank Alpine and Levin are always engaged in. Fidelman’s journey too represents a search for a meaningful life. His search continues as he wanders from town to town and from story to story in the book. In Rome, he meets a Jewish refugee, a schnorrer, a beggar by name Shimon Susskind, who assumes the role of a father figure. He too is a Jew in a Christian land. He lives by providing religious souvenirs to tourists. He knows the nature of people and so he manipulates them. Fidelman also becomes his victim. Susskind chases Fidelman all over Rome and later becomes the pursued. He retrieves the empty briefcase containing the first chapter of his book which had been stolen by Susskind. He has burned the manuscript. Susskind says: "I did you a favour, --- the words were there but the spirit was missing"(37). Malamud caricatures Fidelman by allowing him to comb ghettos, tourist spots, synagogues and even the graveyard where Susskind sometimes gets a small fee for reciting prayers for the dead. Finally he is seen selling rosaries outside St.Peter’s cathedral. As Fidelman chases Susskind, he is struck by a vision of St. Francis of Assissi giving his cloak to a beggar. He, being enlightened, asks him to come back since he has been forgiven. Malamud ends the story in moral perception. Fidelman places himself in strange situations and agonizes over ambitions and his lowly behaviour. He always hopes for the best and gets the worst. He is a mixture of contrast between his farcical adventures and sublime aspirations and between his Schlemiel behaviour and artistic presentations. He feels compassion for Susskind only after experiencing the compassion of St. Francis. Susskind forces Fidelman to discover his identity as a Jew as he, like Bok, had rejected his family and his past.

"The Silver Crown" belongs in the category of moral and allegorical stories. The story with its rabbi, tells us not so much about the Jewish plight
as about the universal opposition of spirituality and materialism. In "The silver Crown," the scientifically trained son cannot make up his mind whether the rabbi, who promises to save his dying father is a charlatan or not. The spiritual talk of the rabbi cannot convince the son. His other stories "The Letter," "My Son, the Murderer," and "Notes from a Lady at a Dinner Party" mostly depict the unsatisfactory father-son relationship.

In "Angel Levine," faith and trust in the dubious messenger do miracles in curing the sick wife. But in "The Silver Crown" we experience a tone which suggests that lack of understanding for the life of the soul and insufficient love and trust in the fellow creatures can lead us to destruction and even impede the chance of miracles or spiritual enlargement or a change of heart. "The German Refugee" in Idiot's First too narrates the same story of tragically misplaced distrust. The story "Idiot's First" is in every sense the story of father-son relationship. Malamud's personal experience of the depression during the inter-war years is reflected in these stories.

"Man in the Drawer" probes the relationship between yet another symbolic pair, representing artistic withdrawal and commitment. Here we see the struggle between a marginally Jewish American writer named Harvitz, and Levitansky, a struggling half Jewish Russian writer. Levitansky dogs after Harvitz for getting his stories published in the United States. But Harvitz is reluctant. But in the end a nightmare which enables in a flash humane insight takes place and the American decides to take the manuscript with him when he goes back. Malamud's idea in handling this theme is that after their search for a spiritual father and when they find one, they accept themselves, their families and then their communities. The same "hostility and acceptance" and the same "hate and love" of the patriarchs is portrayed in the hostility and acceptance of the protagonists in Malamud's novels. Thus they step out of a vague history into the Judaic tradition of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - and the covenant with God.
The Hebraic tradition attaches great importance to considerations of honour and shame. Several aspects of the tribal culture are primarily communicated orally. This communication ties the society together. This tribal oral culture is predominantly an honour-shame culture too as The Interpreters Commentary shows (1074). The words 'shame' and 'honour' occur in The Bible over 150 times each. Shame is often coupled with defeat, reproach, poverty, folly, cruelty, childlessness and nothingness. Honour is coupled with fame, wealth, power and character. According to the Hebrew teachings, wise and righteous living should bring with it the rewards of fuller life especially offspring and prosperity. The story of Jacob and Rachel also reflects the honour and shame tradition. Jacob arrives at his uncle Laban's house. He loves his daughter, Rachel and wants to marry her. But Jacob is unable to pay the bride price. A marriage present was a kind of bride purchase given by the husband to the father-in-law in the ancient Hebraic tradition. So Jacob offers to work for Rachel seven years. Seven years later he finds that he is cheated. He works another seven years to marry Rachel and “the time seemed like only a few days to him, because he loved her” (Gen.29:15-20). After their marriage, Rachel fails to give him a child. Rachel gets disappointed and laments. She cries out in shame while Leah, the first wife, rejoices in honour as she has children.

Job lives in the “honour – shame culture” of the ancient Jews, a tribal culture where family ties are close. He is the patriarch of the tribe and is concerned about its needs, growth in terms of his own descendants and his land, possessions and prosperity. In the prologue Job is depicted as a man of untarnished character and devout faith. “That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil(1: 1). This blameless and upright man is smitten with all kinds of calamities. The friends move around and advise him that he must simply resign himself to the calamities that have befallen him. The traditional belief is that God rewards or punishes people
according to their deeds. Therefore they conclude that Job must have sinned. In oral culture, the important thing is not simply what is said but also how it is said. In such a context, honour and shame are pivotal values. A good name or reputation carries weight and makes one honourable. Eliphaz amplifies his concern with the doctrine of retribution that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous: "Reflect now; who being innocent has ever perished? Where have the upright ever been destroyed?" (4: 7). That Job seems to be in the wrong and is called such of his friends must have been in itself a source of great suffering and affliction. It is not only to be right and just but to be recognized as such by others. Job asks: "These ten times you have cast reproach upon me; are you not ashamed to wrong me?" (19: 3).

Malamud's heroes are generally orphans who live in poverty and shame. To escape from poverty and shame they often leave their original place in search of a better place. Leslie and Joyce Fields in Malamud and the Critics say: "Deeply ashamed of his orphaned state, the heroes set out on a long journey only to escape shame" (86). But often they run into worse circumstances. They are put to intense suffering. Frank Alpine and Yakov Bok in shame and poverty leave their native place in search of honour and money. In The Assistant, Frank Alpine leaves his Catholic orphanage to escape from poverty and shame, in search of an honoured life. In The Fixer the honour-shame culture of the ancient tradition echoes. Yakov Bok after the shame of six years in a childless, impoverished marriage, culminating in the humiliating desertion of his unfaithful wife, cuts off his Jewish beard in shame and begins a journey. He leaves Shtetl to escape from the shame of his youth, the shame of the Jewish past in search of freedom. He having no money and no children, laments and asks: "She bore me no children so who could I look in the eye" (10). He leaves Shtetl because he is childless. We read:

So was his shame. he was leaving because he had earned a worse living-- although he hadn't become a gravedigger--than many he
knew with fewer brains and less skill. He was leaving because he was a childless husband -- 'alive but dead' the Talmud described such a man -- as well as embittered, deserted one. Yet if she had been faithful he would have stayed. Then better she hadn’t been. He should be grateful to be escaping from a fruitless life. (21)

There are also several minor elements common to the Hebraic tradition and Malamud's fiction. As in the Hebraic tradition and The Book of Job, the number '3' dominates in The Fixer. Yakov dreams: "If I had three children!" (25). He raises his offer three roubles a mouth (53) at 3 am in every weather (54). The Fixer gives a ride to an old granny who has "three gray teeth" (23). One wheel is damaged and he thinks he can make it on three wheels (24). "Kiev stood on three hills" (31). Yakov’s early life is narrated in the parts 1 and 2 of the novel as Job is characterized in chapters 1 and 2. Likewise from part 3 onwards in The Fixer, we see Yakov is arrested and he is in prison visited by friends and the dialogue takes place with his friends. Yakov reveries the past (218) like Job in chapter 29. From part 3 onwards in The Book of Job, we come across the curse lament and the dialogical parts.