Chapter One

The American Jews

The land was ours before we were the land’s. She was our land more than a hundred years before we were her people.

- Robert Frost

In 1940, the social psychologist Kurt Lewin articulated:

It is rather difficult to describe positively the characters of the Jewish group as a whole. A religious group with many atheists? A Jewish race with a great diversity of racial qualities among its members? A nation without a state or a territory of its own containing the majority of its people? A group combined by one culture and tradition but actually having in most respects the different values and ideals of the nations in which it lives? (80)

As a scholar of group dynamics and a German Jew who came to the United States in 1933 to escape the Nazis, Lewin was in a position to perceive the particular complexities of a group identity fixed as a category but not bound together by geography or uniform belief. Particularly in the twentieth century, with the decline of religiousness and the unique history pertaining to Jews, “Jew” has become a vexed term (Shostak 740).
Recent scholars in the United States, where assimilation has been so widespread, have attempted in a variety of ways to identify and describe the conditions that might delimit the category of “Jew”. Michael Krausz distinguishes between “Jewish descent” and “Jewish assent” (264). Identity by descent can be traced to the “halakhah”, the traditional Jewish law. Accordingly, one is a Jew either because one is a child of a Jewish mother or because he has converted to Judaism. In all the cases, religious belief is a precondition (268). One is a Jew by assent, “if one identifies with and positions oneself in Jewish historical narratives” (272). The Jew by assent has a specific consciousness of being in history, that Jewishness is a function of a historical position. Garry M. Brodsky argues that the contemporary Jew, as an immigrant or descendant of immigrants fleeing persecution, experiences a particular “felt” relationship to history. According to him, “Jewish history makes itself felt in one’s life as something much more personal and concrete than a body of knowledge about what happened in the past to people other than oneself” (251).

If there is a white ethnic group in the United States that possesses all the characteristics of a minority, it is the Jews. It is the indication of their exceptionalism. While all other minority groups are minorities only in certain relations, the Jews are minorities in all respects. The Irish are a religious minority, but linguistically they belong to the majority. The Germans are a linguistic minority, but they belong to the religious majority. There are groups whose culture is different from that of the majority. The Jews diverge from the
majority in religion, language and culture, in historical experience and social formation. In fact, the Jews had been a minority in all the lands of their emigration.

A number of ethnic groups came to America with a sense of national resentment. This resentment was directed against a particular people that kept them in national bondage. Among Jews, this resentment was directed against the entire world, because they were persecuted and discriminated against everywhere. Precisely for this reason, the Jews, more than any other group, were ideologically motivated. With very few exceptions, the individual Jews bore within them a sense of responsibility for the entire Jewish community; and to that extent, one can say that the Jew was influenced by one or another social philosophy.

The first Jewish community was established in the New World in 1654, though there were some Marrano Jews in the United States as early as 1492 (Wayne 77). The first large wave of Jewish immigration came from Germany during the 1850s and 1860s. Most of these Germans were poor when they reached America. They adapted themselves to the rapidly expanding economy by becoming peddlers and travelling into America’s heartland. It accelerated the rate of German Jewish assimilation and acculturation.

The second major wave of immigration began in the 1880s and continued through the First World War. During these years, approximately, one and a half
million East European Jews fled to the United States. The new immigrants were predominantly Orthodox and they spoke mainly Yiddish. They sought a mutual community in a foreign land and several Yiddish newspapers and theatres thrived in New York. However, the resulting segregation impeded their acculturation and accentuated their foreignness. Many of these immigrants were forced to work in sweet shops for little pay. The Jewish-American community organized the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to protect and aid the newly arrived immigrants (Sherman 57-62).

In America, the Jews suffered the same disabilities and discriminations as the other immigrant groups like the Negroes. The resistance against the establishment of the Jewish community in America evoked the mistrust of the majority and tightened the internal cohesion of the Jewish community. The resistance was the old conflict between assimilating and isolating forces. This conflict was experienced by every ethnic group. The Jews were subjected to discriminations, restrictions and boycotts, and their former homelands deliberately and brutally executed policies to ruin them economically. Such compulsions forced them into exile.

The religious persecutions from which the Jew had to flee were incomparably more severe. Some of the other groups also suffered religious persecutions in their native lands, but they did not have to face the mortal danger
that threatened the Jews. Others came here to seek religious freedom; Jews came here to find physical security as well (Sherman 59).

According to Bezalel Sherman, “The political status of the Jews in the lands of their emigration was intolerable. The Spanish-Portuguese Jews still suffer the effects of inquisition” (59). In Germany, they did not have any political right. The East European Jews fled from pogroms in Russia, from deprivation of rights in Rumania, and from political oppression in other countries. The difference between the Jewish and the non-Jewish immigrants is that the others sought to improve their lot, whereas, the Jews frequently looked simply for a refuge. Again, others could, if they desired, go back to their old countries; for the Jews, there was obviously no way back. When they left their old countries, they burned all their bridges behind them; and at every opportunity they brought their families with them (59-69).

The Jews came from a variety of lands. The differences among these lands were not only geographical but also political, social and cultural (Sherman 62). Each Jewish immigration was an independent one and had no relation with the other streams. Just as there was no political similarity between one wave of Jewish immigration and the other, each was an independent one and had no relation with the other stream. The Sephardim came here during the colonial period and they belonged to the category of settlers and participated in the American republic. The German Jews arrived during the Civil War epoch
and contributed their share to the unification of the American nation. The East European Jews came here during the “Gilded Age” and contributed to the expansion of the American industrial empire.

The sharp differences among these waves were moulded by the following three factors: the economic conditions that prevailed in the lands of emigration, the economic conditions that prevailed in the United States during the periods when each of the wave of immigration arrived, and the assurance which the economic integration of the immigrants instilled in each of the waves.

The Spanish-Portuguese Jews brought with them an experience of mercantilistic operations on a worldwide scale. The first German Jews came to America from all towns, and they were very poor. The Jews of Eastern Europe came from countries where capitalism was just beginning to take its root. They concentrated on the larger industrial centres and became a proletariat. The Sephardic Jews, upon their arrival, spoke Spanish or Portuguese; the German Jews, German and the East European Jews, Yiddish. The Sephardic Jews possessed a considerable measure of general education, but little Jewish culture. The German Jews were not homogenous internally. Germany was divided into many provinces and the attitude towards the Jews was not identical in all the provinces. The great mass of East European immigrants brought with them a good deal of learning but little general education. They came from countries with a high percentage of illiteracy.
The Sephardim considered themselves aristocratic and viewed “Ashkenazim” with contempt. They were steadfastly loyal to their religion and entertained a broad worldliness in political, social and cultural affairs. They produced important works in Jewish religion and philosophy and expressed the traditional longing for ancient homeland of Palestine in wondrous poetry. At the same time, they created works of general human interest and value too.

The Spanish Jews also experienced a conflict, which was external in nature. But the emancipated Jews experienced a conflict within their souls. Social psychologists have described people with such conflicts as marginal persons. In Stonequist’s view, marginal persons passed through three phases: in the first phase, they were not yet aware that their own personal careers were involved in the racial or national conflict in which their religious, racial or ethnic group was caught up; in the second phase, they grasped this fact; and in the third phase, they sought means of adapting to the situation (121-22).

The pressure that the Jews felt in America was not a pressure as in Germany, but rather a social pressure from the tyranny of the majority. According to the German Jews, the Jews were not a people, but a religious association (Sherman 72). The East European Jews were overwhelmingly Orthodox in religion. Those who departed from Orthodoxy moved in the direction not of religious reforms, but of a complete break with religion. The division within the religious community was consequently not between
traditionalists and radicals. On the one hand, this East European immigration in the United States enormously strengthened Orthodoxy and made it the dominant religious trend of the majority of the Jewish population. On the other hand, the same immigration included large numbers of Jews who, despite their irreligiosity, considered themselves an integral part of the Jewish community.

When the Jewish population increased, there arose the demand for accommodation to American circumstances. As the Reform Movement confirms, it was the slogan behind the Reform Movement. In the course of those years, the most important Reform temples transferred their Sabbath services from Saturday to Sunday. Hebrew was virtually eliminated from their liturgy. “Kashruth” (Dietary Laws) and other ritualistic features of personal Jewish life ceased to have the force of religious law and were relegated to the area of free individual choice. The Reform Jews were given to understand that the quality of their Judaism, would in no way, be diminished, if they failed to observe the practices. In fact, the Rabbis themselves were among the first to break with them publicly (Sherman 75).

David Philipson, an early Reform Rabbi, delivered a lecture at a Unitarian Church in Cincinnati. His theme was: “Why I am a Jew?” When he had concluded, he was approached by a woman from the audience who said to him, “If that is Judaism, I am a Jew and did not know it.” Philipson ends his recital of the incident with the remark, “I received many similar words of commendation” (96).
Upon arrival, the Jews spoke five languages: Spanish, Portuguese, German, Yiddish and Ladino. Jewish institutionalism was one of the most important factors making for Jewish group cohesion in America. The foundation of Jewish institutionalism was the synagogue, and through it, they met all their obligations to the Jewish community and all their charitable objectives. In the words of Bezalel Sherman:

The fateful nature of Jewish wandering, its family character, and the impossibility of return to the old country combined to confront Jewish immigrants from the outset, more than any others, with the problem of integration into American life. This in itself could only strengthen the influence of assimilatory factors upon them. (85)

The Jews are the only ethnic group not to have lost its distinctive collective identity within the American melting pot. Utilitarianism, the quick accommodation of the Jews to this country, their entry into business, their speedy absorption of American cultural patterns and the resultant high proportion of their share in intellectual occupations, their swift adaptation to significant aspects of American mores and their acceptance of American forms of entertainment, their nearly uninterpreted economic progress – all these factors hastened the assimilation of all other ethnic groups. But they had no impact on Jewish cohesiveness. It does not mean Jews never dropped out of their community. Many families defected from the Jewish camp. In fact, most of the families that stemmed from the Spanish period and from the early German period are no
longer in the Jewish community. Isaac Mayer Wise complained bemoaning the fact that the Jews were leaving the House of Israel. According to him, “We are well assured that many Jews are lost in this country from not being in the neighbourhood of a congregation. They often marry with Christians, and their posterity lost the true worship of God forever” (qtd. in Sherman 139-40). This happened at the time when the American Jewish community was very small. But the trickle of defection was evident even later, when the community numbered in the millions. The number of mixed marriages, though it is still not large among Jews, has been steadily growing.

The Yiddish language, which produced a rich literature and a very significant culture in America, is dwindling in importance. As Bezalel Sherman points out, all the Yiddish daily newspapers and weekly periodicals outside New York have closed down. The market for Yiddish books has virtually disappeared. The schools in which Yiddish was at the centre of the curriculum are finding it more and more difficult to maintain their position in recent years. A number of them closed down chiefly because they were unable to attract enough students to warrant their continued existence (119).

In spite of all the losses, as an ethnic community, the Jews of America have never been so consolidated and enterprising. Social scientists, scholars and practical communal leaders are of the opinion that the Jews have revealed a staunch sense of group identity and put up a more successful resistance to the
external forces of assimilation than any other white ethnic group in the country’s history. In other words, they are maintaining their ethnic identity. According to Stonequist, “It would be foolish to predict an early end to their group identity” (82). Horace Kallen says that the Jewish districts of New York are a state within a state. Although the Jewish districts are far more in tune with Americanism than other quarters, they are also more autonomous in spirit and self-conscious in culture (113).

Kallen is concerned with the Jewish uniqueness in America. Jews retain their ethnic identity in America not because they cannot adjust to the country, but they retain their identity in spite of their accommodation to American conditions of life. For other groups, assimilation and isolation are alternatives. For the Jews, they are concomitants. According to Bishop Gerald Shaughnessy:

The captivity of the Jews presents the spectacle of a whole people being transported bodily to a strange country and yet not only retaining, but even purifying their religion, because their prophets, priests and Levites had gone with them into exile; because they remained a separate entity even in captivity. (268)

History shows that the Jews have never been allowed to remain in one place even as captives, but were continually forced to seek new homes. America became one of these homes. Wherever they went, they remained a minority and carried frequently more than two cultures. One culture which they carried deep
“within” themselves, within their spiritual and psychic being; and the other, they had upon them as an outer garment (Sherman 123). In fact, they always succeeded in retaining at least in part their inner culture.

Taking into account culture as the sum total of man’s spiritual values and civilization, as the sum total of his material acquisitions, we may say that the Jews were in a position to use their outer culture as a bridge to the civilization of others. They were able to integrate themselves into the conditions of life of the majorities. The Jews exchanged one foreign culture for another. The bicultural nature of Jewish spiritual life has found its clearest expression in the role played by language in Jewish history. Language is the bond holding all ethnic groups together as communities. The moment they cease speaking their own language, their group identity begins to dissolve. As majority of the Jews spoke the language of the country from where they came, their development was through the agency of the English language. In many a case, language never occupied so important a position in Jewish culture.

The very fact that Judaism was the faith of only one group in the whole world, the Jews placed religion at the very heart of their ethnic identity. It created a kind of ghetto even in the heavenly spheres. In 1836, the Congregation Shearith Israel instituted a bylaw, which read, “Any person marrying contrary to our religious law or renouncing Judaism shall not be considered as an Elector or member of this congregation” (Grinstein 376). This provision was rescinded
in 1847. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, there was no place for the non-Jewish spouse in the synagogue or in its cemetery. It was only around 1860 that proselytes began to be included in the Jewish community (Sherman 127).

The Jews attain through accommodation what other groups achieve through assimilation. The German immigrants played a significant role and provided almost the whole of the Jewish intelligentsia in this country. This intelligentsia includes the rabbinate and other religious functionaries, editors of the Anglo-Jewish press, teachers, journalists, authors, lecturers and other Jewish professionals. The deeper the roots struck by the Jewish community in America, the closer the various religious groups came to each other.

The Orthodox synagogue has modernized itself considerably and is gradually passing into the hands of American-born rabbis; but during the same period, the Reform temple has also reverted to more traditional ways. It has also universally abandoned Sunday in favour of the traditional Jewish Sabbath as the day of worship; it has reintroduced a good deal of Hebrew into its liturgy and readopted much of the ritualism that classical Reform discarded. The contemporary Reform Rabbi comes from the same social background as a conservative and native born Orthodox Rabbi; and, as a result, the three sects can often work together not merely in Jewish communal activities, but in larger American undertakings. The former, which embittered anti-Zionism of Reform that has almost entirely vanished and the overwhelming majority of the rabbinate
of all three groups, is pro-Israel today. In general, the Orthodox synagogue and the Reform temple today resemble the two points of a half moon, with the Conservative Synagogue in the middle moving ever closer together.

Help for needy brothers throughout the world was one of the cardinal principles of Jewish collective existence over thousands of years, and American Jewry abided by this principle to an extent that has not been parallel anywhere else. They have also given political help in countries where Jews suffered religious persecution and economic boycotts and where the very existence of the Jews was in jeopardy. This help included support for Jewish demands in Europe, intervention on behalf of Jewish aspirations in Palestine, protests against the violations of Jewish rights in other countries, and similar actions. All this required Jewish unity in the United States. The rise of Nazism led to the intensification of American Jewish efforts to help their brothers suffering under Hitler’s persecution. Though anti-Semitism or Jew-hatred existed in America, prior to the rise of Nazism in Germany, Hitlerism in Europe, stimulated hysteria of a kind previously unheard of in America.

Anti-Semitism is defined as hostile expression or actions against Jews. The term “anti-Semitism” was first coined by Wilhelm Marr or Ernest Ronan in the 1870s to connote the new forms of Jew-baiting generated during the era of Jewish emancipation. It may also mean Jewish-gentile controversies. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the term “anti-Semite” as a “person
hostile to or prejudiced against Jews” (56). Anti-Semitism is of ancient origin. We have ample examples to show anti-Semitism in the Old Testament (Exod. 1: 13-14; Esth. 12: 8-11). Again, there are innumerable instances of anti-Semitism in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

During the Second World War, the German army defeated Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, France, Yugoslavia and Greece. Harsh occupation regimes were set up in the conquered countries. Then they began to carry out anti-Semitic programmes step by step. The Jews were stripped of all human and civic rights. In 1942, the regime began the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” (Bulka 61) in Germany and all the occupied territories. The Jews were mercilessly taken to concentration camps and massacred. The total number of victims is estimated at six million. Anti-Semitism became an integral part of German policy. The policy of the scapegoat initiated by Alexander III in Russia had fateful consequences for all European Jewry. These made the Jews flee to America.

Of the various “white” groups in the American society, the Jews are the most readily excluded from the category of the socially acceptable. In the first place, they are not Christians – an important count against them. In the second place, they are mostly latecomers. It should also be noted that the exclusion of the Jew rests upon a pole opposite to the exclusion of the Negro. The Negro
cannot be accepted because he is regarded as a member of an inferior race; but this charge is never raised against the Jews.

In an essay entitled “The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe” (1919), Thorstein Veblan advances one of the most persuasive hypothesis to account for the existence of social skills among Jews. As an alien, the Jew is born into a community with traditions different from those to be found in the Gentile community. From the day of his birth, he has the advantage or disadvantage of occupying a detached position in relation to the culture of the Gentile world. The extent of this detachment has been a variable factor, depending upon the social distance between the two communities at any particular time or place. When the Jew discovers that his own traditions do not square with the world into which he has been born, and the Gentile traditions are neither better nor more pertinent; he starts reacting against both the cultures as in the case of Portnoy in Portnoy’s Complaint. Once free from the preoccupations of both cultures, he often becomes a creative leader in the world’s intellectual enterprises. Thus, of the thirty-eight Germans who won the Nobel Prize prior to 1933, eleven were German Jews.

According to the Veblan hypothesis, the intellectually gifted Jew, like other men in a similar position, secures immunity from intellectual quietism “at the cost of losing his secure place in the scheme of conventions into which he has been born” (Mc Williams 173). At the same time, he is, in a particular degree,
exposed to the unmeditated facts of the current situation and he takes his orientation from the run of the facts as he finds them, rather than from the traditional interpretation of analogous facts (173). According to Toynbee, “the impact of penalization” enriched their life (qtd. in Mc Williams 174).

The charges of anti-Semitism are reflected in Roth’s *The Ghost Writer* and *Zuckerman Bound* (Berryman 182). In *The Ghost Writer* when a self-righteous and indignant judge wants to shame Nathan Zuckerman with the following question, “Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Geobbel?” (*TGW* 103-04), we understand how far anti-Semitism existed in the society. The power of censorship is also strong in the epilogue to *Zuckerman Bound*. In this story, the Minister of Culture in Czechoslovakia is prepared to banish the young Prometheus. The testing of social and moral conventions is a familiar subject in the fiction of Roth, and it is neither a surprise nor a coincidence that the public greeted his work with outcries about religion and obscenity.

The Jewish stereotype appears in the novels of Robert Herrick, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton. It appears in a particularly offensive form in a sonnet by the distinguished American poet, John Peale Bishop and most significantly in the novels of Thomas Wolfe. All the Jewish characters in Wolfe’s novels are maladjusted or cruel or “queer”. In describing Abraham
Jones in *Of Time and the River*, Wolfe seems to have spewed out all his hatred for the Jews. There was not a little anti-Semitism in much of the writings of the 1920s, notably in the works of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and in a less overt form in the works of Scott Fitzgerald. Occasionally, anti-Semitism assumed the crudest possible expression in their writings (Mc Williams 181-82).

The Jew in America remains a cultural schizophrenic. The Jewish heritage teaches him that he is something special, a creature who is unique and umbilically linked to a historical grandeur and a sense of destiny that best manifests itself through the suffering of its exemplars and which defines them whether or not they seek to escape it. His vision is that of his Promised Land, the land of milk and honey that seems always to lie just beyond his reach (Friedman 149-50). They enter history in Egypt when Moses promised them freedom and salvation. From Exodus they have been in search of the Promised Land. But the modern Jew, who is beyond Exodus, still remains in the wilderness. For him, the Promised Land is a place to live and die. It is a process and not a goal and a place where one goes to eat the forbidden fruit as in the case of Portnoy who indulges in affairs with Gentile women throughout *Portnoy's Complaint*.

American Jewry has made a formidable contribution to the arts in the United States. Although the most widely read American-Jewish works have been published in English, there has been a significant amount of Jewish
literature published in Yiddish and in Hebrew. (Wayne 81-82). Meyer Waxman’s *A History of Jewish Literature* (1960) discusses American Jewish literature. Writers such as Myron Brinig, Abraham Cahan, John Cournos, Meyer Levin, Anzia Yezierska and Henry Roth expressed hopes as well as disappointments of the immigrants in their works during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Alienation is a deeply American theme (Friedman 154). The American is divided between adhering to the old ways and fully adopting the new. The Jew in America is no longer the anomaly he once was. In the 1920s and 1930s there were a handful of Jewish writers like Lionel Trilling, Ben Hecht, Mike Gold and Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth in the 1950s and the latter part of the twentieth century.

According to Malin and Stark, the Jew is seen to be an existential hero and therefore “a modern Everyman” (665-90). The Jew is singled out, because of his victimization, uprootedness, and history of suffering. Jewish American fiction tends to be about seeking home, about the conflicts between fathers and sons, about coming to terms with history, about dualities, about the heart and about transcendence (Nesher 17-18). Theodore Solotareff defines Jewish American writing in a thematic and moralistic framework. In Malamud, Roth and Bellow, Solotareff identifies the theme of suffering leading to purification (20).
According to Allen Guttmann, Jewish American literature is a transient into social and historical phenomenon, documenting the immigrant Jew’s conversion to other passions – communism, capitalism, and secularism. Assimilation, he argues, was inevitable and imminent (39-57). During the decade of the 1950s, the state of Jewish letters flourished in America.

The novelists of the 1920s and the 30s reflected the immigrant life with usual Jewish rage against the oppression in sweet-shops where their parents worked, and the ironical gulf between the American dream and actuality (Venkateswarlu 7). Abraham Cahan’s novel The Rise of David Levinsky (1917) is actually about the fall of David Levinsky. Having realized the American dream of success, he feels empty, rootless and spiritually exhausted. This is a common theme – the conflict between values and the American identity – for many and varying novelists like Budd Shulberg, Herman Woub, Herbert Gold, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth. The Bellow generation novelists – Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, Leslie Fielder, J.D. Salinger and the less well-known novelists such as Ruth Seid, Jerome Weidman, Charles Angoff, Fannie Hurst and Edward Wallant – deal with Jewish family, marriage, education, parent-child relations, a stable home and compassion for the little man.

In Waiting For the End (1964), Leslie Fielder writes of the relative innocence of the late 1950s, when the enemy was still without, and when “the
Jew who thinks he is an American, yet feels in his deepest heart an irremittable
difference from the Gentile American who thinks he is a Jew, need only to go
abroad to realize that, in the eyes of non-Americans, the difference does not exist
at all” (102).

American Jewish novelists are mainly pre-occupied with the “complex fate” of being a Jew in America. Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth render their experience of acculturation in their short stories and novels (Sharma vii). Whereas Bellow dislikes being called a Jew, Roth is a severe critic of Orthodox Judaism. Both of them are aware of Jewish assumptions, but their emphasis is on secular trans-ethnic values. Bellow’s response to Jewishness is quite striking; he regards himself as a “Midwesterner and not a Jew”:

I am often described as a Jewish writer; in much the same way one
might be called a Samoan astronomer or an Eskimo cellist or a
Zulu Gainsborough expert. There is some oddity about it. I am a
Jew, and I have written some books. I have tried to fit my soul into
the Jewish-writer category, but it does not feel comfortably
accommodated there. I wonder, now and then, whether Philip Roth
and Bernard Malamud and I have not become the Hart Schaffner
and Marx of our trade [. . .]. My joke is not broad enough to cover
the contempt I feel for the opportunists, wise guys, and cares types
who impose such labels and trade upon them. (72)
Bellow clearly does not wish to be included in the category of American-Jewish novelists, or of novelists of Jewish origin settled in America.

According to Bernard Malamud, “the Jew is humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspiration” (Podhoretz 177). Malamud himself explains his point of view when he says that he writes about Jews because he knows something about them. He also asserts that he is not a religious Jew (Sharma ix). Malamud’s heroes and anti-heroes are Jews striving to acquire a foothold in life. It is their persistent search for a qualitatively “new life” that projects Malamud’s moral vision, and his reactions to the problem of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. He describes the anguish of the disinherited and the injured bakers, shoemakers, tailors, grocers and matchmakers. He captures the feeble voice of human relatedness. Most of the characters are fugitives from tyranny and injustice who, sitting hunched behind counters, spin fantasies about a better life (Sharma vii - x).

In *The Assistant* (1957), Morris Bober is a little man who has a small shop and barely ekes out his existence and leads an honest life. But he never attends the synagogue. On his death, the rabbi mentions that he is a real Jew. In this novel, Malamud seems to suggest that the essence of Jewishness is not merely ritualistic but living a fairly honest life (Venkateswarlu 11). In *God’s Grace* (1982), Malamud is forever redefining or attempting to explore the multiple dimensions of the image of the Jew. The message of *The Jewbird* (1977) is that
adjustment is needed for the Jews and Gentiles to co-exist in unity. In the words of Eli, for the adjustment, both the Jews and Gentiles alike have to give up some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other (Malamud 163). In *The Fixer* (1966), the protagonist Yakov Bok defines history as “the world’s bad memory” and being a Jew is “an everlasting curse”, and says, “We’re all in history, that’s sure, but some are more than others, Jews more than some” (314-15). The Jew lives in and of this world; for all western religions, Judaism is the most secular and agnostic, the least concerned with considering this world as a stage in some larger process and pointed towards some otherworldly ultimate. His agnosticism and secularism lead him to humanism, to an intense concern that the day-to-day events of the here and now are compassion and consideration, and love and peace (Friedman 152). In Malamud’s *The Assistant* (1957), the Rabbi’s eulogy over Morris Bober, makes the same point in more concrete terms:

The Rabbi gazed down at his prayer book, then looked up.

“When a Jew dies, who asks if he is a Jew? He is a Jew, we don’t ask. There are many ways to be a Jew. So if somebody comes to me and says, “Rabbi, shall we call such a man Jewish who lived and worked among the gentiles and sold them pig meat, trayfe, that we don’t eat it, and not once in twenty years comes inside a synagogue, is such a man a Jew, rabbi?” To him I will say, “Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish
experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart”. May be not to our formal tradition [. . .] but he was true to the spirit of our life – to want for others that which he wants also for himself. He followed the Law which God gave to Moses on Sinai and told him to bring to the people. He suffered, he endured, but with hope [. . .]. He asked for himself little – nothing, but he wanted for his beloved child a better existence than he had. For such reasons he was a Jew. What more does our sweet God ask his poor people? (195-96)

The Jew, after his arrival in America, feels doubly estranged – a continuing anomaly, an outsider in the wilderness which is the Gentiles’ Promised Land (Friedman 153). In Isaac Rosenfeld’s phrase, he becomes ‘a specialist in alienation’ (qtd. in Malin 14).

Unlike Malamud’s Jews, Saul Bellow’s are thinking people, often intellectuals or writers but the writer does not explore their connection with the tradition adequately. To be sure, they are not self-hating Jews. There is vigorous Jewish humour in Bellow’s novels. But these Jews mostly belong to the Jewish street. They may know and even imbibe the nuances of Jewish life and its ethnic context in America but they never show enough awareness of their tradition to be able to have a dialogue with it. Charlie and Humboldt in Humboldt’s Gift (1975), Herzog and his brother in Herzog (1976), Sammler, Elya Gruner and his
children in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) and many other Jews in *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987) and those of his most recent novels reflect their peripheral connection with the normative Judaism even if they are not self-hating Jews (Venkateswarlu 11).

*Henderson, The Rain King* (1966) is a successful effort of Saul Bellow. Though its protagonist is a Jew, it is a parody on Hemingway that all right-thinking American Jewish writers had unconsciously been awaiting. The title character, who shares Hemingway’s initials, is a middle-aged millionaire who fails to find happiness or peace by trying to raise pigs or cope with his family. He flees to Africa, rejects the safari approach to seek out the natives, becomes a kind of local deity through no talent of his own except brute strength and sheer stupidity, discovers that one is akin to the kind of animal one identifies with, has his vision, and then flies safely out of Africa and back, presumably, to connubial bliss and domestic tranquility – an ending whose very helpfulness, especially cast in such a form, mocks those achieved by Hemingway’s protagonists, and of course, by Hemingway himself.

What is perhaps at once strange and paradoxical is that America herself has become a Jewish mother surrogate, supreme creator of schizophrenia in all her sons. Thus, for the Jews, assimilation seems a truism, for, the contents of the broken melting pot have escaped and covered the ground making everyone an outsider (Friedman 157).
Contemporary Jewish writers are neither monolithic nor univocal. They speak with many voices though they share the same tongue and the same questioning attitude towards the equivocal world and their variety of protagonists try gamely to survive in. Salinger’s half-Jewish protagonists are kids of all ages, adolescents, like Holder Caulfield, and brittle post-adolescents like the aptly named members of the Glass family; like miniature Hemingway heroes.

The protagonist of the modern American-Jewish novel takes pride in being an obsessive self-confessor whose verbal diarrhea is, he thinks, preventive medicine against the constipation he will surely inherit from his father. As Friedman aptly comments:

Tragic heroes are psychotic, possessed of a monomaniacal sense of grandeur; but the Jewish hero, like Roth’s Portnoy, is neurotic – and he whines about it, but his whining itself is often a thing of glory, so brilliant that it impresses him, dazzles him – and he revels in it, drinks to it, indulges himself in it, plays it for all its worth before whatever audience he can capture by mesmerization or money, whether it be Portnoy’s analyst, Zooey Glass’s Fat Lady, the group of psychiatrists gathered to watch the closed-circuit performance in Bellow’s *The Last Analysis*, or the myriad recipients living or dead, of Herzog’s endless letters (158).
Like Malamud’s characters, Roth’s are Jewish all the way. But their humour has turned to feverishly pitched self-deprecation rather than bitter resignation. What Roth has written is a nervous *buildungsroman*, its protagonist stretched on the analyst’s couch during the entire novel, circling in and around his rites of passage from innocence to neurosis, trying to define his experience as an assimilated, heritage-rejecting American Jew, who still feels himself as one part, unique, doomed to be different from the fellow Americans and he longs to embrace it as his own. The theme in *Portnoy’s Complaint* concerns the use and abuse of the intellect and, more specifically, the ambiguous role of the intellect in Jewish culture.

For American Jews, the memory of the Holocaust both contrasts with and implicitly threatens the vaunted freedom of America and the successful assimilation that defines American Jewish life in the latter part of the twentieth century (Lochmann 29-30). In Lore Segal’s *Her First American* (1985) a novel about the experiences of a young Holocaust survivor adapting to the life in America, the protagonist tells her all- American lover that she must return home early that evening to care for her mother, who suffers from nightmares about the Holocaust; he responds, “open(ing) and drop(ping) his arms in an outside gesture to demonstrate the breadth of her freedom, his powerlessness to hold her, ‘Any time at all’” (Segal 34). The assumed freedom that characterizes his approach to life is diametrically opposed to lack of freedom and the burden of memory connected with the Holocaust that characterizes the approach of the protagonist.
The effect of the Holocaust on American Jewish understanding of the influence of history on the present has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Cynthia Ozick stresses the fear of a second Holocaust in America, based on the knowledge that the first one occurred in a place where Jews had become highly assimilated and successful. Robert Alter cautions against such fears, enumerating the ways in which “our contemporary existence is warped by being viewed in the dark glass of the Holocaust. We can never put out of our minds what happened to our people in Europe, but their reality is not ours” (54). James Young suggests a compromise by exploring how memories and representations of the Holocaust shape the present, rather than simply relegating subsequent generations to living in the past (84). He envisions a dynamic interaction between past and present, which encompasses the importance of memory while simultaneously allowing for future development and change.

The difficulty of writing about the Holocaust is compounded for American Jews by their distance from the event, both geographically and chronologically. Holocaust literature was not written in the United States until 1960s. Since then, the Holocaust has received an astounding amount of attention from American Jewish writers. In writing about the Holocaust and the abundance of literary responses to it, it is important to distinguish between the Holocaust itself and the “rhetorical, cultural, political and religious uses to which the disaster has been put since then” (Lopate 90). Nothing remains of the six million Jews and the European culture that died with them. In their places we
have the multitudes of responses from those who lived to bear witness and those who experienced the Holocaust only indirectly. Lawrence Langer delineates the difference between the event and the symbolism which has occurred since:

For Dachau, like Auschwitz and in a related sense like Hiroshima, is no longer merely a place-name with grim historical associations for those who care to pursue them. All three have been absorbed into the collective memory of the human community as independent symbols of a quality of experience more subtle, complex and elusive than the names themselves can possibly convey. (xii)

Writing about the Holocaust, thus, produces new memories and associations (Lochmann 32).

The term “Holocaust” is used as a metaphor for twentieth century existential and artistic crises and as a basis for propounding new literary theories as in Dominick LaCapra’s *Representing the Holocaust* (1994). LaCapra justifies his use of the Holocaust by the contention that “there is in reality no history without theory” (3). Commercially, the Holocaust has become a rich source of profit and entertainment, with disturbing implications about the ethics of making money from the Holocaust. Politically, the Holocaust has become a standard against oppression, murder and racism. Toni Morrison begins her novel *Beloved* (1987), about the atrocities of slavery with a dedication to the “Sixty Million and more”. The protagonist in Tillie Olsen’s *Tell Me A Riddle* (1956)
contextualizes her own suffering by comparing it with the suffering of those who endured trains to concentration camps, slave ships, and the bombing of Hiroshima. In its religious terms the Holocaust assumes its most complicated role. But still, memorializing the Holocaust becomes one more instance of the secularization of Judaism.

Fiction serves as a bridge between the Holocaust and the present. The writings of those who did not directly experience the Holocaust increasingly comprise the majority of the Holocaust literature being produced. Survivors and witnesses struggled primarily with the issue of whether the Holocaust could be represented. Contemporary writers focus on “the consequences of interpretation” – namely, the responses to interpretation and its influence on later events (Young 4). In *The Shawl* (1990), Ozick explores the consequences of the survivor Rosa’s memory in terms of her behaviour in present day Florida. In *Maus* (1994), Spiegelman is anxious about his own dual role as son and author and about the transmission of his father’s testimony. In *The Ghost Writer* (1979), Philip Roth has Nathan Zuckerman to create a fantasy about Anne Frank in response to challenges to his own, present day Jewish loyalty. Roth seems to be one among those Jewish American writers who have understood the immensity of the Holocaust in its fullest dimension, and he confesses its impact on the Jew in his fiction.