Chapter III

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Saul Bellow, the winner of the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature and the recipient of three National Book awards, is a unique spokesman for humanitarian ideals in American literature in the twentieth century. His writings epitomize the moral vision that is an integral part of the Jewish outlook. He believes in the divinity of the individual, that although a person may be psychologically and emotionally fragile, he/she is created in the image of God and is therefore majestic.

After the war the public was ready for and needed something else. Coming so close to annihilation, it needed a literature of hope and optimism, a literature that would restore dignity to man and a value to his life. Saul Bellow brought with him a world view that was life sustaining, predicated on a belief in the inherent goodness of man and the basic significance of existence. The overall perspective of his works is essentially Jewish and to an extent, religious in its moral concern.

“He is Jewish and his joy of living expresses his deeply rooted Jewish orientation. Certainly, Bellow is aware of the various literary trends. He even satirizes them in his fiction and criticizes them in his essays. Yet it is the Jewish tradition to which Bellow is heir and from this perspective he views and balances all that comes his way.” ¹
Bellow’s writing is highly subjective and is based upon the tradition of a personal relationship between man and His Creator. (One of Herzog’s letters is directed to God. It is not an instance of blasphemy. It is an aspect of the Jewish tradition and clearly defines the Jewish attitude towards the Universe).

Bellow protagonist never attempts to involve himself in anything of the Jewish significance, nor does he attempt to do anything “Jewishly”. He remains Jewish by default. He is a Jewish protagonist, created by a Jewish author, who espouses a Jewish philosophy (unconscious though it may be). Although Bellow presents a historically accurate picture in his depiction of the assimilated American Jewish community, nevertheless the Jewishness of Bellow’s protagonists is equivocal because it is unaccounted for. His heroes are intellectuals, and he appears to subsume their knowledge of Judaism into a general intellectual framework.

_Dangling Man_², Bellow’s first novel, is written in the personal voice of a protagonist whose principal domain is his own sensibility, and whose principal audience is himself. It concerns a war casualty who has not yet fought in the war, a man alienated from his surroundings and in the Limbo. Joseph has been called up to the army, but because of red tape he has not yet been inducted. He has left his job, moved out of his apartment, but for almost a year has lived in a situation of “dangling”
between two worlds, being neither a soldier nor a civilian. Bellow probes the mind of a sensitive, introspective man in this situation. As the months go by Joseph quarrels with nearly all his friends and relatives, lives off the earnings of his faithful wife Eva, succumbs to fits of paranoia and anger, engages in a desultory affair, learns to hate the physical decay of his elderly neighbors, and is haunted by death anxieties. Reduced to the same common physical, social, and historical denominators as everyone else, he is last seen standing in a line of naked military recruits indignant at being prodded and poked by an elderly military physician, prior to entering the Navy. It is a novel which reflects much of Bellow’s early life as a young intellectual, immersed in literature of all kinds, isolated in a cheap, rented apartment, poor, impractical, and also waiting to be drafted. It is also the lament of a young artist who does not know how to join the mainstream of Chicago or American life without losing the spiritual value of his isolation. Central to the novel was the theme of search for the value of individual freedom, the meaning of moral responsibility, and the demands of social contract, themes Bellow and other American writers would continue to explore in the decades up to the present. Here Bellow uses Jewish protagonist, in a typical Jewish situation (which in a broadest outlook can be considered universal), and allows him to react according to his intellect and upbringing. “Joseph’s present status as a “dangling man” is indicative of how the Jew
is viewed in society.”

Joseph’s present predicament raises another issue: the question of the meaning of the freedom. Joseph is “free”. He has all the time in the world to do whatever he wants. Yet he feels more imprisoned now. As he says, “I, in this room, separate, alienated, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail” The freedom that he has terrifies him, and he is pained by his own “paralysis of will” Real freedom consists in the ability to choose that which you prefer to do. This freedom of choice goes back to the basic tenets of Judaism. Joseph does not come to this illumination easily. He becomes a Jacob figure in dealing with his situation. Only after struggling with an unseen adversary, as did Jacob, does he realize what his role in society is? He may not always make the right decision, but that is part of the human conflict. Joseph has ideas about the war generally, but he does not relate to it specially. He seems unaware of what is happening in Europe to the Jews or he is unaffected by them. In fact his attitude towards anti-Semitism is naïve. Bellow suggests that anti-Semitism is present but is reluctant to label it as such. Joseph recalls one incident of going to his German friend Will Harscha where he is disliked by Will’s mother. He rationalizes Mrs. Harscha’s statement by saying, “Mrs. Harscha may have disliked me because I was too “well-behaved,” or because of a way of mine in boyhood of making or attempting to make, a compact with the adult relatives of my friends, particularly mothers, over
the heads of their sons.” Bellow is suggesting the unfounded hatred expressed by the Germans towards Jews, a hatred which has its basis in folklore, and is so ingrained in the psyche that just the sight of a Jew will conjure up visions and allusions to the devil. It is a significant point which reveals the German’s hatred for the Jew and the Jews’ guilt feelings for possibly being responsible for creating such an image. What this episode indicates is Bellow’s timidity in dealing with large issues, a characteristic that will continue throughout his writings. This trait is evidenced again in Bellow’s reluctance to make his protagonist definitely Jewish. Another paradigm established by this initial concise novel is suggested within the title itself. Bellow presents man’s world and this male oriented society will continue to be the subject of his writings and will be alluded in the title of his subsequent fiction, e. g., The Adventures of Augie March, Henderson the Rain King, Herzog, Mr. Sammler’s Planet, and Humboldt’s Gift. Also, the title implies the role of the woman, who is untroubled by momentous problems of a universal nature (she doesn’t “dangle”) but devotes herself to the immediate concerns of daily living.

One notices that there are essentially three types of women in this introductory novel: wife, mother, and lover. Within the traditional Jewish, the three are combined into one figure. In Bellow’s works, these works,
these roles are never incorporated into one entity entitled “woman”, but
represent the categories by which his women are classified. None is
developed to any degree, nor do the categories overlap. The wife of the
protagonist may be a mother, but she is usually not both during the course
of the novel. For example, Mandeline is depicted as a mother but she is
no longer Herzog’s wife. In Dangling Man, Eva is a wife but not a
mother. Dolly, Joseph’s sister-in-law, functions as Etta’s mother, but then
she is only tangentially related to the protagonist. The lover is however is
external to the family structure. “There are no matriarchs in this work, no
Saraths, Rebeccas, Rachels, or Leahs, nor are they to be found in Bellow’s
subsequent writings. His women tend to be more like the Christological
Eve archetype, evil figures leading men to their destruction. Etta shows
signs of becoming such a woman.”

Iva, Joseph’s wife, is a shadowy
figure, almost like the Hemingway female, mindless and devoted to her
man. Yet her self-esteem increases in ratio to Joseph’s self-denigration.
She is a good woman, sensitive to the needs of her husband while
demanding little for herself. She is not a mother. She never indicates that
she would like to become a mother, nor do they discuss having a family.
Her role is that of a wife, and even as that, we do not see them on an
intimate level. That relationship belongs with someone else, in this case,
Kitty Daumler. Generally speaking, Joseph’s marital relationship is
strained. Perhaps this difficulty is an aspect of his situation as a “dangling
man”; more likely, it indicates bellow’s concept of family life and foreshadows the relationship his future protagonists will have with their wives. The One strong family bond that is evident in this work and will continue throughout Bellow’s writings is that between brothers. On Bellow’s part it is both a universal statement and particular one. It affirms the social responsibility inherent in the communal brotherhood of man. It also depicts a specific family bond that is indissoluble, unlike the contract between husband and wife. Joseph quarrels with his brother but it does not last long. In a way Dangling Man seems to outline almost in silhouette form, some of the problems bellow will continue to confront, in varying degrees, in his future works.

The Victim \(^{13}\) explores in an intense manner the ability of twentieth-century man to cope with victimization and paranoia. Asa Leventhal, a Jew who has been emotionally scarred in childhood by his mother’s madness and screaming fits, and who failed to form a relationship with his father, lost both parents, enters the post WW II American workplace minus both parents and carrying with him his personal fears and a keen sense of the prevailing anti-Semitism. During one long hot summer during which his wife is temporarily absent, Asa wrestles with fears about his job security, and the predations into his private life of his seedy, gentile nemesis, Kirby Allbee. Furthermore, he
must deal with his resentment concerning the absence of his brother, Max, the pleas for help of his indigent sister-in-law, the death of his tiny nephew, his own prejudices about the Roman Catholic immigrant family his brother has married into, and his fear that the mad-looking immigrant mother-in-law blames him for the child’s death. We last see Asa accompanied by his wife, somewhat healed from his paranoia, reconciled to his brother, distanced finally from his horror of what the gentile Allbee represents, and awaiting the birth of his first child. But like Joseph, he has had to learn to conquer the anxieties that paranoia, anger, and self-isolation produce in him and admit his dependency on love and friendship, as well as his moral and social responsibility to others. Behind this novel’s prevailing nightmare cityscape, described in colonialist terms as a chaotic primeval African jungle of terrors, and as a pitiless African lion which does not care about anything human, Bellow explores the case for civilization. Critics of Holocaust literature have also read this novel as Bellow’s psychological treatment of the Holocaust, the Nuremberg tribunals, and the whole phenomenon of anti-Semitism. Yet others have detected the influence of Bellow’s fascination with European literature and with Dostoevsky in particular. In such readings, Asa Leventhal becomes the eternal Jew who must deal with a world not of his making. However, Bellow again poses the central moral question he
Leventhal discusses Disraeli with his Jewish friends, he says:

I don’t have it in for him. But he wanted to lead England. In spite of the fact that he was a Jew, not because he cared about empires so much. People laughed at his nose, so he took up boxing; they laughed at his poetic silk clothes, so he put on black; and they laughed at his books, so he showed them. He got into politics and became prime minister. He did it all on nerve.

Bellow’s description of Disraeli suggests the Jew’s insecurity in a Gentile world.

“There is a constant juxtaposition of Christian and Jewish thought, culminating in a clash between the Jew and the Gentile in what is perhaps one of the best psychological discussions of anti-Semitism written by a major novelist in the wake of the Second World War.”

Asa Levanthal is a man, who, we are told in the beginning itself feels a kinship with all of humanity. In this work Bellow indicates that social responsibility leads to parasitism and moral degeneration, when it goes too far.

Though social responsibility is a pillar of Jewish thought, it is also an accepted norm of universal social behavior. Asa is constantly faced with the question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” and in answering that...
question he may grumble but he never declines the responsibility. In fact he is upset at his brother because he feels Max has shirked his responsibility by going to Texas and leaving his family to fend for itself. Asa says: “he sends them money and that makes him a father. That’s the end of the responsibilities.” While Asa is troubled with the problems of his brother’s family, another malady erupts to further disturb his equanimity. Kirby Allbee, whom Asa has met briefly, accuses Asa of being the cause of the loss of his job, and, therefore insists that Asa assume the burden of responsibility of Albee and his regeneration or his reentry into the societal structure. Asa’s intuitive reaction is to reject all those accusations but his deeply rooted humanistic outlook makes him listen and find out what actually happened. And Asa realizes that he was only indirectly responsible for Albee’s loss. But Albee goes one step further and says this is a conspiracy and calculated revenge by a Jew. This complaint, that the Christian is a victim of a Jewish plot, recalls the charge of anti-Semites through the ages that the Jews have victimized the charitable, innocent, unsuspecting Christians. Behind it all is the concept of the Jew as Christ-killer (the first victim) and his plot to ensnare the world. Bellow ties in the present accusation with its historical precedents when he suggests a relationship between the present “plot” and past blood libels. When Albee accosts Asa and tells him: “You ruined me. Ruined!...You’re the one that’s responsible. You did it to me deliberately,
out of hate. Out of pure hate!” Asa pushes him in an attempt to dislodge himself from Kirby’s clutches, he angrily shouts at him: “No blood. Too bad. Then you could say I spilled your blood, too” 17 Who is to blame? Is Asa really socially responsible for Kirby? Is Kirby a victim of Asa? Kirby is shrewd, calculating, cunning and finally destructive. He is guilty of all those things he accuses Asa with: hate, prejudice, vengefulness, selfishness and feelings of superiority. Bellow clearly states what he views as the Gentile’s attitude towards the Jew and how this deep-rooted anti-Semitism is perpetuated. “The insistence that the Jew is of another species, of another mentality belonging to a different world attempting to encroach where he doesn’t belong and isn’t welcome, pervades the attitude expressed by Kirby.” 18 Kirby function is to indicate how the Jew is perceived in society. The name Albee suggests Albion or All Beings – other than the Jews, that is. Bellow gives a multi-faceted view of this problem. He describes not only how the Jew is viewed by others in society but how he views himself, thereby suggesting how the Kirby Albee phenomenon makes its appearance. Asa and Harkavy represent two types of Jews: one is victimized; the other is not. Asa epitomizes the self-conscious Jew, full of apprehensions and suspicions. He considers himself a different type of Jew from what his father was. His father’s relationship with the Gentile was strictly business, as reflected in the verse he heard him repeat: “Call me Ikey, call me Moe, but give me the
dough.” For Asa’s father it is strictly business relationship and nothing else. He realizes the goy hates him but he is desensitized towards his antagonist. He is not interested in being on an equal footing because he considers himself superior. Bellow also indicates that this thinking belongs to a group that is no longer with us and what remains are the feelings projected by the Asas who, indeed, feel alienated or the Harkavys who do not think about it at all. Harkavy is much better adjusted than is Asa and as a result the Albees does not seek him out. Asa recognizes his responsibility to society to the point where he feels victimized. But it is only by means of his struggle with Kirby that he comes to a full valuation of himself. Albee appears as an angel, a monster, as a secret sharer, seeking to become one with Asa and thereby destroy him. Asa ejects Kirby from his domicile, but Kirby returns for a final showdown. He attempts to commit suicide in Asa’s apartment and take his alter ego or antagonist with him. The struggle they enter into is the turning point of Asa’s life; he actually becomes a new person. Immediately following this confrontation, he telephones his wife to come home and shortly after that he gets a new job with a prestigious trade magazine. Asa’s wife is absent during the events of the novel. Asa is a married man with an absentee wife, and he foreshadows the marital status of Bellow’s future protagonists; husband sans spouses. The broken marriage is typical of the American scene especially since the Second
World War and is also prevalent in the Jewish homes as well. As for Max, Asa’s younger brother, who not only did marry a Gentile but became like one, his father thinks is a common laborer, which is a non-Jewish mentality.

“Here Bellow points to a Jewish folk attitude which has developed without much basis, but has been perpetuated by Jew and non-Jew alike. Certainly through the ages, the Jew has earned his livelihood through a combination of hard work and ingenuity. There were also the restrictions as to what the Jew could do and what was not allowed to him. For the most part the restraints were so great that he became expert at survival. Hence the quality of craftiness which possessed both admirable and pejorative connotations was attributed to the Jew.” 20

When he came to America he started out as a laborer but always attempted to rise above his initial position. There were those early immigrants like Asa’s father who were small shopkeepers but even the factory workers labored hard so that their children would get education and would not have to do the same work. Now considering this background Max represents a lapse from this ideal and a break from this tradition. He is associated with what has been called as non-Jewish attributes: a common laborer, an absent father, and a distant brother. Asa on the other hand while not reflecting traditional Judaism as such, possesses characteristics of Jewish people: he is an intellectual, a family
man, a surrogate father to his brother’s family and possesses a close feeling of kinship. Taken in a historical context, The Victim expresses attitudes that have sustained the Jewish folk throughout history. Bellow addresses himself to one man’s anti-Semitism and to one stock character, Kirby Albee.

The Adventures of Augie March, Bellow’s most exuberant and nostalgic book, is set in Depression era Chicago. Written as a contemporary bildungsroman, and picaresque adventure chronicle, it is the coming-of-age novel of the larky Augie March. Here Bellow has provided a remarkable account of Augie and his brother Simon, and their fatherless family comprised of his rather gentle and witless mother, adopted Grandma Lausch, and her poodle, Winnie. Beyond that is provides a remarkably rich Dreiserian chronicle of neighborhood types. It is essentially the record of Bellow’s own immersion in the immigrant South Side Chicago neighborhoods done in minute realistic detail, and with the passage of time seems somewhat of a social realist period piece.

Central to the moral issues and the case for optimism set up in the novel is the comparison between two brothers—Augie the optimist, and Simon the cynical materialist. This dialectical juxtaposition of pairs of brothers, or alter egos, becomes a hallmark of all of Bellow’s fiction. Unlike Joseph and Asa of the first two novels, Augie March is much less trapped
in a masculine world, much less racially anxious, more generous in his trust in women, and generally less misanthropic. Augie is a new kind of American hero who still demands a certain kind of freedom, but who is in late middle age as he finishes his comic heroic account of himself and his age is still in search of his fate. Bellow’s Augie March suggests a approach to life which is unique and uniquely Jewish. Humor is an essential ingredient in the character of the Jew. It is not the humor of the belly-laugh, though that may be present at times. Jewish humor is a perspective on life. Bellow himself in suggesting that humor brings one closer to god, propounds a similar idea. He says:

> Jewish humor is mysterious and eludes our efforts- even in my opinion, the efforts of Sigmund Freud-to analyze it…..The real secret, the ultimate mystery, may never reveal itself to the earnest thought of a Spinoza, but when we laugh (the idea is remotely Hassidic) our minds refer us to God’s existence. Chaos is *exposed.*

Laughter and tears are essential elements in Bellow’s protagonists. While examining Augie’s Jewish qualities David Daiches says:

> Augie March’s Jewishness like the Jewishness of most of the families with whom he comes in contact…is not solidly grounded in Jewish custom and culture….his Jewishness is embodies in his “adventure,” in his questing, his restlessness, and …his shoring himself with massive cultural supplies from European literature and history to try to provide a world
of knowledge and feeling to which he can finally belong. 22

“One of Augie’s extraordinary qualities is his prolixity. It is also one of his Jewish traits”. 23 Bellow’s observes “Powerlessness appears to force people to have recourse to words” 24 This suggests the power of words and paralysis of action. His statement refers to life in shtetl where that was able to overcome the weakness of his position by the strength of his speech. However the roots of the proverbial prolixity of the Jewish people actually stem from the biblical injunction to constantly verbalize the word of God. 25 This oral tradition began at Sinai and was handed down from generation to generation. But not only did the Jew talk about the law, or tell stories he was commanded very early to articulate his passions and feelings. (As soon as the child begins to speak his parents are required to teach him the Shema which articulates the commitment of the Jew to God and His Torah) Verbalizing became part of his very nature, and he became adept at it, until it became a source of power to him. Also, Jews are a “bookish” people. They place a high priority on education and learning. And Augie is both self-educated and verbose. His Jewish education amounted to that which he gathered from those with whom he came in contact, and his oral tradition came from Grandma Lausch, Anna Coblin, and perhaps his mother. As for his English education, he was graduated from high school, spent a little time at
college, but all said and done he was a self-educated man. He reads voraciously. Some of his language is too erudite.

In Bellow’s novels we see women essential are sexual creature presented in a negative manner. They are the offspring of the prototype Eve, rather than those of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah or Rachel. Invariably his women appear non-Jewish or neutral, simply because there is nothing to suggest otherwise. Neither names, or actions, nor background tell us anything. Yet the three women, whom Augie at separate times thinks of marrying, are figures that traditionally appear in literature as destructive goddess figures. Lucy represents Lucifer; Thea is a generic term for goddess, and Stella is Ishtar the goddess of love of the ancient world, who is also the greatest impediment to Israel’s fidelity to the God of Israel and is denounced vigorously by the prophets. Augie marries Stella, and she becomes an impediment to his higher aspirations. She foils his attempt to establish a foster home for children; she is not ready to have a family, which Augie desires, and she has many secrets about her past love life which causes Augie much distress.

We have archeological evidence that supports the demand of the sex Goddess for castration of her male devotees. Once she has deprived them of their masculinity they are subject to her domination. In Bellow’s narrative Thea wants to train an eagle, a symbol of her own high
aspirations and desires to dominate, to attack the iguanas. Augie participates unwillingly but proves to be an ineffective partner in the chase. Once Augie suffers an injury to the end, a symbol of decapitation in a way symbol of castration his usefulness to Thea is at an end. At this point she goes on in pursuit of another lover and this time the image of the snakes is even more obvious.

Bellow’s works omit a positive relationship between a Jewish male protagonist and a Jewish female. This negative attitude is not Jewish. The Jewish attitude may perceive of the women in a domestic capacity, but appreciatively not deprecatingly. If we refer back to Old Testament, the woman’s role is twofold, domestic and cognitive. In fact the bible ascribes to women much more acumen than to their husbands. This type of “woman of valor” is not to be found in Bellow’s works. Throughout his novels, the woman is strictly a sex-object. Even the mother figures are sex objects. L.H. Goldman is of the opinion,

“..the pejorative position that Bellow attaches to his women indicates a contradiction in the essentially humanistic attitude presented in his works. To view women as either belonging solely in the kitchen or in bed is a perspective, no matter what the roots are, unworthy of the intelligent philanthropos Bellow appears to be”.

Augie looks to the men for values. Mr. Einhorn, Simon, Grandma Lausch, in her surrogate father role, Padilla, Bastershaw, Mintouchian,
Tambrow— or at least men seek to instruct him in values. We note however that the females want to adopt him; the males want to affect him. We see the androgynous Grandma Lausch as Augie’s first influence. She plays a dual role. From her feminine visage, he gets a distorted view of religion, but as a cigarette smoking, chess-playing tyrant, she preaches values to him that he retains as an adult. Concerning the matter of love and respect she says, “Nobody asks you to love the whole world, only to be honest, ehrlich. Don’t have a loud mouth. The more you love people the more they’ll mix you up. A child loves, a person respects. Respect is better than love.”

She explains to Augie that her main interest is to make a mensch out of him.

There are other characteristics of Augie which are generally accepted as Jewish but which may also be universal. One of these is Augie as a family man, his intense feeling of closeness and loyalty to his family and his sensitivity to the importance of the family. All of Bellow’s protagonists share this quality. In ascribing this trait to the Jewish protagonists he creates, Bellow follows biblical tradition. After all the history of the people of Israel is a history of one man, Jacob and his progeny. Bellow is also voicing the prevailing belief that the basis of Jewish survival is close family ties. Augie says in his own jargon: “I was sucker for it too, family love.” At the time of the writing of these
memoirs, he is in Europe with Stella but he reflects: “I would have preferred to stay in the States and have children.” 29 Augie’s quality of compassion extends to animals too. He disapproves the wild scheme of training an eagle to hunt iguanas. He considers the idea of training a powerful beast to prey upon a defenseless creature as inhumane and unnecessary and is relieved when the small creature strikes back and even wounds the giant eagle Thea is like the eagle but the iguanas (Augie and others) fight back. Perhaps Augie’s most Jewish quality is his commitment to society, his feeling of social responsibility. This is evident in Augie’s immense involvement with others, which is reflected in his compassionate and sensitive nature. He never withdraws from people. His comment regarding Rousseau stresses importance of man’s recognition of himself as a social creature, and notes that the only way he can affect society is in its midst, not by withdrawal and objective recollection.

*Seize the Day* 30, Bellow’s most read book, is a sober and deliberate retreat from the exuberance of *The Adventures of Augie March*. The world of this novel is an urban wasteland replete with the sepulchral Hotel Gloriana. Out of work as a salesman, and estranged from his wife and children, Tommy Wilhelm finds himself nearly penniless in early middle age. As a young man he has rejected his father’s profession, medicine, tried out for a career in Hollywood, been tricked by a phony
talent scout, ended up in sales and lost his district due to his boss’s nepotism. He is Bellow’s version of the classic schlemiehl of Yiddish folklore. In the dreadful Hotel Glorianna, amidst the aging capitalist fathers of a previous era, Tommy becomes aware that he has failed to fulfill their notions of masculine achievement. However, while he has failure to accomplish the American capitalist dream, he appears to be cultivating alternate values of love, feeling, compassion, and non-competition. Ultimately Tommy is conned not only out of his remaining cash, but also almost out of human hope as well. Years later, Bellow told interviewer that he was appalled at the philosophical immaturity of Augie March and wrote *Seize the Day* in an attempt to transcend its effusive and emotional limitations. All of Bellow’s novels deal with family conflicts, but *Seize the Day* is unique in that it is his only work which attempts to explore the relationship between father and son against a backdrop of a complex view of the dissolution of the Jewish–American family. The Jewishness of Tommy Wilhelm is evident in this parent-child relationship and is presented in terms of biblical imagery. Tommy is both a Jacob and Esau figure. He is a deceitful person and also the rebellious son who denounces his birthright for selfish reasons. He is born into an assimilated Jewish family in which education is of utmost importance. Against his father’s wish of becoming a doctor Tommy chooses to become an actor. As an assimilated Jew, tommy has equivocal Jewish values. The father is
a product of German upbringing whereas Tommy possesses qualities that are antithetical to the German mind. The discord in the family is heightened by the fact that both father and son are at crucial stages of their lives: the father is an octogenarian, facing the end of his days, while the son is middle-aged, attempting to grasp the significance of his life.

The parent-child relationship is fundamental in Judaism because it is recognized that the survival of Jewish life depends on this bond. Its importance is emphasized by the position of this bond at the center of the Decalogue. This Fifth Commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother” suggests a mode of behavior that will strengthen the family and speaks in terms of the obligation of child to parent. This tradition of honoring one’s parents remained a vital aspect of the Jewish child’s life, throughout the ages, down to the present time. Curiously we see in Bellow that minor characters usually have a full family whereas the family of the protagonist is broken. He is usually separated or divorced from his wife, and his mother is only a memory. If the mother is present, she is not like the revered figures of the matriarchs. She is not the configuration of the Jewish mother, fully devoted to her home, her husband, and her children. She is not the strength to her family, a posture which has long been a major theme of both Jewish folklore and the Jewish consciousness. In Bellow’s works she is a shadowy figure (as
in *Augie March*) or better still a non-entity (as in *Dangling Man* and *The victim*) or dead as in *Seize the Day*. “Bellow is uncomfortable with women, who in his fiction, fall into three categories: mother, wife and lover. The wife and lover he depicts in terms of stereotypes: bitches, destructive sex goddesses, or sufferers.” 33 It would be wrong to ascribe these qualities to a Jewish mother figure; therefore, it is simpler for Bellow to omit this crucial aspect of the family entity. So although there is a strong family feeling on the part of Bellow’s protagonists, he renders the family as fractured social unit. This is not a contraction. The protagonists project the ideal but they are set within the realistic framework of American life. Even the solid Jewish family shows signs of rupture in the twentieth-century. The immediate problem in *Seize the Day* is presented in terms of the son’s appeal to his father for help. Tommy is a desperate financial bind. He has quit his job and has no income. Dr. Addler possesses German mannerisms. He is stiff, formal, detached, overbearing, dominating, precise, efficient, industrious and thrifty. His son on the other hand, suggests a temperament that is more Eastern European, possibly coming from his mother’s side. The father rejects the son for being so unlike himself. And the son accuses the father of being “unsympathetic” and “unloving”. Upon leaving home Tommy also changes his name and drops last name “He had cast off his father’s, name and with it his father’s opinion of him. It was, he knew it was, his
bid for liberty, Adler being in his mind the title of the species, Tommy the freedom of the person.” 34 It is also the novel in which the seeming-orphanage of Joseph, Asa, and Augie, develops into an in-depth treatment of the failure of a father-son relationship. Dr. Adler, the highly successful, but narcissistic, arrogant old surgeon, spurns his son’s emotional pleas for nurturance and financial help. Embarrassed by Tommy’s repeated failures, he lies to his friends in the retirement home of his son’s financial prowess. Dr. Adler clearly refuses to validate any other form of masculine achievement other than financial. Into his character Bellow invests hostility and moral reproach. The devilish morality play figure, Dr. Tamkin, who spouts absurdist philosophy, mangled Freudianism, alienation ethics, and cheap nihilism to Tommy, is presented as a charlatan and a physical grotesque. While Tommy longs for accessible, sensible truths, Tamkin assures him there are only crooked lines. When Tommy asks him where he gets his ideas from, Tamkin becomes the butt of one of Bellow’s funniest jokes: “I read the best of literature, science, and philosophy,”35 he says. In his carpe diem sermon, in which Tamkin tells Tommy to take no thought for tomorrow because the past has no value and the future is an impending nightmare. In spite of his wife’s, his employer’s, his father’s, and Tamkin’s betrayal of him, Tommy, in this reading seems naively determined to “recover the good, things, the happy things, the easy tranquil things of life [. . .].”36
Herzog is Bellow’s most Jewish novel. Externally, it concerns a man in the crisis of middle-age, on the verge of a mental breakdown, but from the aspect of the Jewish reader and Jewish writer, Bellow presents a study of assimilation. It presents the dissolution of a family which sparks the dissolution of personality. Inwardly the individual is imprisoned in his own mind, in having to prove himself that life is worthwhile, that he still is human. This is Herzog’s problem. Yet this problem is linked with Jewish identity because it concerns the fate of the individual Jew. And this reflects and affects the fate of the Jewish people. Bellow’s choice of names for the protagonist is related to this novel, Moses Ekanah Herzog, is related to this consideration of Jewish identity. Readers of James Joyce’s Ulysses recall the name of Moses Herzog as that of a minor character, a grocer and a victim of Irish anti-Semitism. “Bellow’s use of the name Moses for his Jewish protagonist of Herzog clearly indicates that his concerns will be with the themes of slavery, freedom, and wandering.” 37 At the end of the novel Herzog quotes the biblical Moses when he says, “Here I am. Hineni!” 38 Moses Herzog is what Dan Vogel refers to as the “progeny of the generation of Abraham Cahan’s David Levinsky.” 39 He suggests that “Levinsky ….represents….the parent generation that produced the Moses Herzog of American Jewish history.” 40 Both Levinsky and Herzog attempt to assimilate into their American milieu, but they cannot. The past keeps obtruding into the present. Herzog
though an assimilated Jew, is a man with keen memory. In *Herzog*, Bellow presents a much more complete picture of a family than any of his other works, and also indicates its evolution and dissolution. The portrait of the traditional Jewish family is presented in the flashbacks that deal with Moses’ childhood. We note that the hierarchal structure was maintained: the father had his place in the family and the mother hers. Jonah Herzog, although he was a gentleman in Russia, was a failure as a provider in Montreal. Nevertheless, to his family he was a “sacred being, a king”\(^{41}\) Sarah, Moses’ mother, saw to it that he was always treated that way. When he returned home beaten, bloody and penniless from his abortive attempts to run whiskey across the border, Sarah comforted him, bathed his wounds, and watched over him silently after she put him to bed. She never uttered a word of rebuke, other than suggesting that he give up this means of livelihood. Sarah indeed represents the typical Jewish mother: she is self-sacrificing, doting, and devoted. She maintains the stability of the home and sees to it that everything runs smoothly. Jonah is not a provider, but the family is well-fed anyway and kept clean. Her children are sent to the best schools; her daughter takes piano lessons while the boys study more serious objects. She even provides entertainment for the children by pulling them on their sleds in the Montreal snow in the winter time, unmindful of the cost to her own health. She seems content in her position in the hierarchal structure of the
Herzog family and attempts to perpetuate it by acquiescence and repetition. Sarah Herzog’s life was difficult and her self-sacrificing earned her an early death. The esteem in which she held her husband was not reciprocated. This was the environment in which Moses grew up. This was what he got from his first wife, Daisy, but he was bored with her. What satisfied his father was not enough for him. He wanted a different type of patriarchy at a time when patriarchs were no longer fashionable. He exclaims: “He could be a patriarch, as every Herzog was meant to be.”

“What happens in Herzog is so far removed from his Judaism that he, too, can only view it in its stereotypic context. What Bellow is presenting is not living Judaism, but remembered Judaism. As such he reflects the destiny of the second generation immigrant Jews, the progeny of David Levinsky.”

Herzog, during his period of crisis, writes letters to the thinkers of all ages commenting on the thoughts propounded by them, but does not write a letter to and eminent Jewish scholar, past or contemporary. It is revealing omission. It indicates that his knowledge of Judaism is superficial, that he discontinued his Hebrew (or Judaic) studies at an early age, and it substantiates the statement that he was a “freethinker” at sixteen. It also suggests that his assimilation was psychological not intellectual, motivated by the amalgamated feelings of inadequacy and
arrogance, and as attested to by his description of his home in Ludeyville: symbol of his Jewish struggle for a solid footing in “White Anglo-Saxon protestant America….” Herzog thinks: “myself is thus and so, and will continue thus and so. And why fight it? My balance comes from instability. Not organization or courage, as with other people. ”

Madeleine, Herzog’s second wife views her perfection in terms of Christianity. She views her life as pleasurable, therefore, sinful and only by means of suffering and repentance can she redeem herself and achieve salvation. She is taught by the church that sex is sinful; yet she enjoys her relationship with Herzog and feels guilty about it. Her parents discuss her neuroticism, and Herzog sees it for himself; yet he is ready to act as her savior because his ego is flattered by her attentions, and his self-esteem allows him to feel that his love for her will restore her to normalcy. But Madeleine is not a normal woman. Herzog is a father figure to her, and she hates her father. Consequently, she almost destroys Herzog. Herzog says: “…Women…eat green salad and drink human blood” She effectively cripples her husband for a while. She cuckolds him and makes him feel impotent. She turns all his friends against him. She convinces them, and Herzog himself, of his paranoiac tendencies. She discards him as a husband and father, after she’s gotten all that she needs for her comfort, and attempts to take his place in the academic world. Madeleine, for Bellow, epitomizes the beautiful, intelligent, conniving, destructive,
selfish woman. Yet Bellow underscores the point that Madeleine is basically a sick individual, that her childhood fostered and nurtured the neurotic tendencies that are part of her personality as a grown woman. Bellow’s problem is related to his unrealistic view of the woman whom he presents in such clear-cut categories that they become inhuman character types, the Madeleines, or the Ramonas. The Madeleines are the symbols, the abstractions, the personifications, the caricatures. The Ramonas are also creative extravagances. She is described by Herzog as, “extremely attractive, slightly foreign, well educated” yet, we see her only in terms of her role as sexual priestess. She is completely traditional in her thinking. Expert in both kitchen and the bedroom, her sole purpose is to bring pleasure to the man in her life, both gastronomically and sexually, to listen to his troubles, bandage his wounds, soothe his fears, while playing Egyptian music, to feed his body, feed his soul and his ego. She is opposite of Madeleine, but is just as unrealistic. Herzog is tempted by all that Ramona has to offer, but he is not in a position yet, psychologically and physically, to make a commitment.

Herzog’s Judaism is weak. He does not display an overt Jewish identity, but only one based on memories. His childhood experiences have created not a participating Jew, not a well-informed Jew, but a Jew who is a mensch. As Sandor Himmelstien says to Herzog, “You’re not
like those other university phonies. You’re a *mensch*.

“Herzog’s Jewishness, while lacking the rituals and ceremonies which have kept the Jewish nation distinct from their gentile neighbors, is revealed in his expression of a basic Jewish ethos.”

Life is filled with difficulties, with deceits, and even death but man’s choice must always be *I’chayim*, “to life”, as set forth in the in the Bible, “…therefore choose life, that thou mayest live”

Herzog realizes this when he reflects upon the early death of his mother and says: “He could not allow himself to die yet. The children needed him. His duty was to live. To be sane, and to live and to look after the kids”

The Jewish ethos is presented in emphasizing a person’s freedom of choice. It indicates that life is not totally circumscribed and that one possesses a meaningful freedom. Herzog, like all of Bellow’s protagonists, presents the Jewish attitude toward society as propounded by Hillel, the sage: “do not separate yourself from the community”.

Herzog tells his friend Luke: “I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human….”

When Herzog, at the end of his journey says: “Here I am. Hineni!” this is what he means. Moses, quoting his biblical forebear and also the patriarch of the Jewish people, is ready to commit himself to fulfilling the contract he made with God-life!
Mr. Sammler’s Planet is set in 1960s New York City at the height of the student radical movements. It presents the misogynous Mr. Sammler, a classic old world “Western Civ” literary thinker and European aristocrat who spans exactly Bellow’s own period of social and philosophical acculturation. Here the elderly Holocaust survivor from the old Austro-Hungarian Empire wanders in the alien world of hippie-era New York; where to his American Jewish relatives he becomes an archaic leftover from another age, a priestly or sacred object, survivor of both a symbolic and a literal Holocaust. Bellow presents Sammler as a dysfunctional man whose entire acculturation and education, not to mention near-death experiences during the Holocaust, have rendered him less humanly disengaged. Spiritually and emotionally Sammler, has put himself on ice, and must now in late life he must allow his familial and humane feelings to return, just as he must accept the family which has accepted him, and the by now neurotic daughter he finds it hard to love. Bellow suggests that the Jew and the Black have something in common. Neither can avoid the essential substance. Both will be reminded by society that they are different. As for Sammler, he could not lose himself within the Anglo-axon or East-European aggregate. If did not openly identify with the Jewish people, others did it for him.
It should also be noted that, in all of Bellow’s works, licentiousness is a woman’s vice. The man may stray and have numerous love affairs, as do Herzog, Tommy Wilhem and Augie March, but the woman is depicted as sexually corrupt, such as in the cases of Thea and Madeleine. This point is emphasized by the polar portraits of the sexes in Mr. Sammler’s Planet. All the women are depicted pejoratively, Angela and her mother as castrating females and Margotte and Shula as devious and eccentric. They all deploy similar, familiar stratagem: theatrics, seduction, insolence, or the culinary arts. Their ultimate purposes are self-gratification and castration or destruction of the male. The men have their special quirks, but they are depicted sympathetically. Sammler’s scavenger daughter, Shula is a passionate woman, passionately collects sundry objects, is passionately religious and passionately devoted to her father. Sammler considers Shula a “nut”, who “had too many oddities for her old father”.54 Religiously, she is a “praying nut” whose Jewishness rests upon her devotion to culture, but she has “Christian periods” as well as did Madeleine in Herzog. Margotte Arkin, Sammler’s niece, is portrayed more sympathetically, but also sardonically. She does not keep the house clean and in that shares a quality with many of Bellow’s homemakers: Madeleine in Herzog, Lily in Henderson the Rain King, Mrs Almstadt in Dangling Man. Another feminine character who is treated most harshly in this work is Angela Gruner, Elya’s daughter. Her
name represents the anticipation of her parents, but not the reality of the woman. As viewed by Sammler, she is an inversion of her name, a wealthy *femme fatale* let loose in New York City. She sees her father’s death in terms of financial gain. She also never utters word of compassion or affection, sentiments is a characteristic Bellow associates with Jews— all his protagonists are sentimental— and Angela’s lack of sentiment, her lack of “heart”, indicates how removed she is from Jewish values.

*The Bellarosa Connection* 55 is a much better crafted and more complex novella. Reveals Bellow examining the net worth of his life as writer, and as an American Jew. Sorella is an overweight American Jewess who has missed out on early romance and has ultimately married Harry Fonstein, a Jewish Holocaust survivor from Italy. The focus of the story is primarily on the unnamed narrator is overcome with the desire to find the couple and repent of his own American Jewish amnesia with regard to the consequences of the Holocaust. He knows he must deal with his own identity as a Jew, and the realization that he has lived more through memory than through actual relationships and moral commitments. Bellow seems to be commenting on the cruel, ironic loss of one’s significant dead, while one still possesses a perfect and powerful memory which preserves them in their absence as if it were yesterday. It is the wise Sorella, his anima, whose loss he feels most sharply, along
with that of his own Jewish soul. He wonders whether he has passed the American test and held his ground, knowing all the while that he really hasn’t. Finally he realizes: “Maybe the power of memory was to blame. Remembering them so well, did I need actually to see them? To keep them in mental suspension was enough. They were part of the permanent cast of characters, in absentia permanently. There wasn’t a thing for them to do.” 56

Through the years, the Jewishness of Bellow’s fiction has remained equivocal. “His overall *Weltanschauung* is Jewish but the milieu within each novel is generally non-sectarian.” 57 Asa discovers his Jewishness, enacting Sartre’s definition in *Anti-Semite and Jew*:

> What is it, then, that serves to keep a semblance of unity in the Jewish community? To reply to this question, we must come back to the idea of *situation*. It is neither their past, their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name Jew, it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is they live in a community that takes them for Jews.58

Bellow’s protagonists are concerned with freedom of choice, social responsibility, the life-style of a good man. And the preservation of human individuality and uniqueness. The Bellow protagonist approaches life from the Jewish perspective, which is optimistic, which firmly believes that it is a sin to neglect the pleasures of life which are also God-
created. Consequently, the distinctive Jewish characteristics of the Bellow novel are its candid *joie de vivre* and its comic treatment of otherwise somber situations. There are other Jewish features in his novel. Bellow relies heavily on biblical imagery. He uses the story of Jacob as a paradigm for his protagonists, who limp along, survivors in their struggles with the unseen adversary, the essence of life itself.

Bellow’s work presents a picture of American-Jewish communal life. His protagonists however, function within an old-new world framework. He is thoroughly modern Jew, with all the connotations of the term. He has no interest in Jewish affairs, is not affiliated with a synagogue or temple, nor any Jewish educational institution, on the brink of divorce from his Jewish wife. Bellow’s heroes are Jewish by default. They espouse a Jewish philosophy but they are unaware of it. They are not men of action, rather men of reaction. Nevertheless, Bellow’s novels offer something for all. The intellectual community will feel that he speaks personally to them empathizing with them. The gentile community notes that while his protagonists are Jewish his fiction is not parochial and is able to relate to universal themes, issues and characters. The Jewish community recognizes that not only are the protagonists Jewish but so are the perspectives, and the problems depicted and omitted are basic concerns that trouble their community.
Bellow in his works, voices the Jewish opinion that man, with all his imperfections, is basically good. The ideal is not the transcendence of human nature but the refining of its essence. That is why all Bellow’s protagonists search for an answer to the question: How should a good man live? The individual that Bellow puts forth as a ‘good man’ is the son of Jacob and is imperfect. He may be an intellectual but he is always self-centered and at times morose, as is Joseph in Dangling Man, timid, as Asa in The Victim, jocular, as Augie March, infantile, as is Tommy Wilhelm in Seize the Day, or neurotic as is Moses Herzog. Nevertheless he is a ‘good man’. It is a matter of perspective, depending on how one views the human being. The quest of Bellow’s protagonist is for a method of “coming to terms with his own nature in a universe that denies him his own essence…”\textsuperscript{59}
References

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24. Ibid.
28. Ibid. 243.
29. Ibid. 584.
32. Cf. Rafael Patai’s discussion of the Jewish family in *The Jewish Mind* New York: Chas. Scribner’s
35. Ibid. 54.
36. Ibid. 156.
40. Ibid. 70.
42. Ibid. 249.
45. Ibid. 55.
46. Ibid. 56.
47. Ibid. 23.
48. Ibid. 103.
50. Deuteronomy 30:19
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53. Ibid. 377.
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