

Philip Roth's Diasporism: A Symposium

Once again, as he did more than twenty-five years ago, Philip Roth has succeeded in shaking up some of the complacencies of Jewish existence. Not taking any chances this time, however, Roth refrains from creating a character who might be taken as his alter-ego. (Me, I'm not Alex Portnoy, and my mother is not Sophie, he seemed to be saying in all the novels that followed Portnoy's Complaint); in his newest novel, *Operation Shylock*, he creates an alter-ego ("Philip Roth") who is, patently, NOT the author. If Alex Portnoy outraged millions of Jews by masturbating on the pages of Jewish fiction, Philip Roth the Imposter will enrage some of those millions (or their children) by espousing the theory for which George Steiner was run out of town: that the Diaspora is the only viable place for Jews. To be more exact, that the Jews of Israel, who face imminent destruction at the hands of the Arabs (read the "second Holocaust") should be dispatched back to Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, and Kiev.

Roth, in the New York Times essay that announced the publication of this book, called this posturing a "bit of Jewish mischief." But having largely succeeded, with Portnoy, in "putting the id back in Yid" and changing the provenance of American Jewish literature, he is, one might argue, a writer to be reckoned with—precisely when he sounds most outrageous. The theory of "Diasporism" is espoused in the context of the Demjanjuk trial on the one hand and the Intifada and the miscarriage of justice in regard to Palestinians on the other. Bearing in mind that it is not Philip Roth but "Philip Roth" who espouses such ideas, TIKKUN has asked a number of writers to respond to *Operation Shylock* and the philosophy of Diasporism.

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi

Whether *Operation Shylock* should be shelved next to Ber Borochov and Y.L. Pinsker as a polemical tract debating the fate of the Jews, or next to Amos Oz and David Grossman as a travelogue through the occupied areas of the Jewish mind; whether it belongs among the textbooks for Judaism 101, highlighting the Great (and Not So Great) Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People—from Jacob wrestling with the angel through the language codes of the Chafetz Chaim to the diaries of Leon Klinghoffer (with Moshe Pipik dancing a jig in the wake of each somber procession); whether it is a novel of espionage and counter-espionage that demonstrates that, after *Shylock*, we will always be three thousand ducats short in the coffers of our own self-esteem—but cleverer by half than all our enemies; whether there are no real Jewish people in the book but only The Jewish People (and their counterpart, The Palestinian People)—it is a narrative that, by its own admission, aspires to be "something more drastic than a mere book." It may turn out to be considerably less drastic than a "mere" book; the stakes, in any case, are high. "I've been putting myself in difficulties like this all my life," admits the narrator, Philip Roth; "but, up till now, by and large in fiction. How exactly do I get out of this?" (p.142).

The struggle here, which may appear, from the endless diatribes delivered by interested parties, to be a contest between Zionism and Diasporism for privilege in the late twentieth century, really boils down to a choice between something we might call Life and something we might call Fiction. Of course, we've already visited that Great Divide under the auspices of Philip Roth: *Facts* and *The*

Counterlife were both experiments in trying on alternative destinies and rescuing one's dear ones from their mistakes and their coronaries through the power of the pen.... But never has such intervention been so consequential. The fate of whole peoples now seems to lie in the balance. (To wit: the deletion of the "eleventh chapter" of the narrative, in which certain secrets of the Israeli Intelligence Operation might have been revealed...)

Putting the id back in Yid was child's play compared to the task of removing the rock from under Jacob's head (if some Palestinian teenager hasn't already requisitioned it for the Intifada), folding it up like a notebook (as the rabbis suggested nearly two millennia ago while engaging in what may have been the first monumental textualization of territory), and sending Jacob back into the world to wander for another eternity.

Our great comfort is the expectation that the Wandering Jew will also be a storyteller. *Operation Shylock* is, in fact, a very noisy novel. Words are flung like stones, done and undone like refugee bundles on an endless highway. Diaspora is the place where people talk. It is also the place where people eat. Even the whitefish salad has a genealogy: In a "Jewish food store on Amsterdam Avenue...the bitter fragrance of vinegar, of onions, of whitefish and red herring, of everything pickled, peppered, salted, smoked, soaked, stewed, marinated, and dried, smells with a lineage that...more than likely led straight back through the shtetl to the medieval ghetto."

These are the passages we can sink our teeth into, words with the promise of a story. Exile is the beginning of narrative. In the Middle East, however, where exile comes to an end, so, it seems, do the stories. Talk becomes consequential. Words can kill. Each of the pale speakers in this series

of endless monologues presumably conceals a knife or an Uzi (although a few of the non-Mediterranean types use weapons from Roth's more conventional arsenal. . .). Though the names of some of the characters have been changed to protect their "identity," the American-educated Palestinian, who might still have been talking about Raskolnikov had he remained at the University of Chicago, is actually gunned down in the streets of Ramallah. And the Mossad's secret weapon, "*losbon hora*," has the power to silence any potential defector. Heady stuff, when the American Jewish writer—or his double—is recruited by the PLO and the Mossad, invited to speak with Lech Walesa, the Pope, and Arafat. His only shield the thought that, when all this becomes too threatening, he at least can find some way out of the plot and return to New Jersey, to fiction that doesn't really count so much, to textuality that doesn't kill. For that is what Diasporism amounts to here, the privilege to try out any role, any character, without paying the consequences of identity. (Identity which is a bit shaky after all these years, anyway. Is Demjanjuk, on trial in Jerusalem for the duration of the narrative, really Ivan the Terrible—or is he Ivan the Not-So-Terrible?? And the Israeli Jews themselves: After all these years, they don't look much like victims anymore. . .)

When "nomadism" competes with "nativism" not only in English and anthropology departments but among Jews who are increasingly disgusted with the abuse of Israeli power in a postcolonial era; when speech acts become the passport into the highest echelons of the American elite, and "narrativity" is the ascendant order of the imagination; when, after all these years, Gimpel the Fool (a saner Moshe Pipik—and a better storyteller) can compete again for cultural privilege with the swarthiest of Israeli soldiers—"Diasporism," in its more sanitized version, becomes as politically correct as Zionism was twenty-five years ago.

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi is a visiting fellow at Princeton University and associate professor of comparative Jewish literature at the Hebrew University. She is completing a book on exile and homecoming in the modern Jewish imagination.

Daniel Lazare

How do I respond to the philosophy of Diasporism? Positively. Unlike Roth/"Roth," I don't think it's an issue of who's better, the Jews of Israel or the Jews of Europe and America. Both groups have their good and bad, left- and right-wing elements, and any attempt to categorize an entire people in this manner is bound to be inaccurate. Rather, it's a question of ideology, i.e., assimilationism versus nation-

alism. To the degree *Operation Shylock* is a brief in favor of the former, it's welcome. Roth has taken sentiments that European and American Jews barely allowed themselves to breathe for most of the postwar period and has delivered them full blast.

And what are those sentiments? Roth, a man whose work essentially celebrates all that is mixed up and confused about twentieth-century existence in the Diaspora, comes down, not surprisingly, four-square in favor of mixing and confusion. For years, a certain type of querulous Jew in this country has allowed him- or herself to be racked with guilt about marching in behalf of Black civil rights, sleeping outside the faith, or worshiping at the shrine of Marx or Freud when real Jews were supposedly fighting Arabs and planting trees in Israel. To which Philip Roth (in whole or in part) now replies: Nuts, our angst is our strength. Instead of feeling guilty, we should be proud. Out of this anxious, scattered, unheroic existence in Europe and America have come socialism, psychoanalysis, and the theory of relativity. Out of the nationalistic, embattled, ethnically-cleansed existence in Israel has come—what? The invasion of Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip settlements, and the Intifada. As one of Roth's various pro-Diasporist mouthpieces (in this case an embittered Palestinian) puts it: "What do they know about 'Jewish,' these 'healthy, confident' Jews who look down their noses at your Diaspora 'neurotics'? . . . Jews who make military brutes out of their sons—and how superior they feel to you Jews. . . who know in their bones the meaning of give-and-take? Who live with success, like tolerant human beings, in the great world of crosscurrents and human differences?" (pp. 124-125)

Exactly. Roth has taken the Zionist stereotype of the insecure, deracinated Diaspora Jew and stood it on its head (or, to paraphrase Marx and Engels, on its feet). It's not mixing it up with the rest of the world that's the problem, he suggests, but Israeli-style self-ghettoization and withdrawal. The "neuroticism" of the Diaspora Jew is actually the result of political and ethical engagement with an imperfect, conflict-ridden world, whereas Zionist "health" is the result of the opposite: ethical disengagement and surrender to the amoral *realpolitik* that governs relations between and among nation-states. In a moral sense, it's healthier to be neurotic, a sentiment that a true-blue Zionist would find incomprehensible but the various characters in *Operation Shylock* do not.

Or so Roth seems to argue. Unfortunately, one of the many defects of *Operation Shylock* is the author's studied ambiguity on the assimilation-separatism question, an ambiguity which allows him to rail against Zionism through his various fictional creations (assuming, of course, they are fictional) while signing up as a Mossad agent at the end of the novel.

At its most radical, assimilationism argues that mixing it up with non-Jews is nice but insufficient. Much as Marx called for the liberating of Jews from Judaism (to use a much-maligned phrase), the task these days is to liberate Jewishness from the Jews. Israel represents a throwback to the blood-and-soil ideology of romantic nationalism, whereas life in a heavily but not exclusively Jewish neighborhood like Manhattan's Upper West Side, which Roth celebrates, represents the opposite, a fast-forward glimpse into a post-nationalist future in which outmoded concepts like ethnicity and homeland matter not a whit, and whose genes we carry is less important than how we conduct ourselves or what kind of society we choose to build. If we agree that modern Jewishness has had something to contribute in terms of tolerance, justice, and democracy, then the sooner these qualities are divorced from any ethnic base and become the common property of all, the better off we'll be—Jews, Blacks, Puerto Ricans, et al. Ethics are, by definition, universal. If the Jews really are a light unto the nations, then their assignment in this age of Sarajevo and the Intifada is to help lead the rest of the world out of the swamp of nationalism and ethnicity.

Daniel Lazare is a freelance writer in New York whose work appears in the Village Voice, In These Times, and other publications.

Daphne Merkin

I begin with a few crabby questions, brought on by an observation that kept nagging at me while reading *Operation Shylock*—this hybrid, self-devouring novel/confession/whatever. The late critic Anatole Broyard once remarked to me that the problem, as he saw it, with serious writers who became famous or celebrated was that they no longer had any input coming through, except of the most adulatory kind. Broyard had in mind a particular set of writers—Roth among them—and I think his comment had less to do with a sense of these writers being perched enviably up above the world, immune to critical assessment and able to do as they pleased, as with a sense of their no longer being porous, no longer being able to hear what was going on around them. This, of course, is a particularly dangerous situation for someone who makes his living by catching the winds of awareness as they ruffle our lives—by putting on paper what the rest of us only dimly divine.

To wit: Does the sight of the two words—blow job—on the page really alarm, or even titillate, people any-

more? Even when performed by a blonde, shiksa goddess incarnate on a member of the deeply tribal and neurotic Chosen People? Does the “Jewishy Yiddish” country of Philip Roth’s infinitely nostalgic, not to say stalled, imagination—an America of “green lawns and white Jews,” of knishes at Zabar’s—still speak to our current sense of things, the *realpolitik* of life at the tail end of the second millennium, when anti-Semitism has reared its obdurate head in new and complex ways not only in Europe or in the fundamentalist rearguard of America but right here in the heart of “Hymietown”? Lastly, is there anything left to be wrung out of the preoccupations of our “leading Jewologist of international literature?” Do we want to know anymore than we already know about his happy childhood in Newark as a doted-upon and academically gifted second son, his love of baseball, and his fatal attraction to benign-seeming but ultimately entrapping Gentile females, which led to his “lurid first marriage” (referred to twice in those exact words in *Operation Shylock*), his literary influences (Dostoyevsky and Henry James, most signally), his Jewish problem, his ire taking particular aim at doctors and their benighted consumerist habits—forever playing tennis, forever traveling for the pleasure of staying at the Ritz and emptying out Gucci’s?

“Part of the Jewish problem,” Roth explains to us near the end of *Operation Shylock*, “is that the voice is too loud. Too insistent. Too aggressive.” A good part of my problem with this book is that Roth doesn’t seem to have gotten wise to the fact that: (a) Taboos, as well as dress fashions, date. Starting with the sixties, starting perhaps with *Portnoy’s Complaint*, the erotic life and its discontents—“the hazardous allurements of the flesh and the pecker’s irrepressible urge to squirt” (as unappetizing a description of the libidinal impulse as any I’ve read, right up there with Roth’s description of vaginal secretions as having a “heavy, clinging, muttoney[!] stench”)—has been given full exposure in both high- and low-brow books and movies.

It’s difficult, in other words, to *épater les bourgeois* if there’s no *bourgeois* left to *épater*. I would hazard a guess that even well-brought-up Jewish boys-turned-men don’t get a charge, as they once did, by being privy to “dirty goy secrets.”

Times have gotten hard for those, like Roth, who cling to the concept of the literarily *outré*. What you get left with is the wish to shock—and a bunch of slightly limp sexual sight-gags. What you get left with, almost in desperation, are women—like Wanda Jane “Jinx” Possesski—who talk in the idiom of pimps, as though there were stimulation to be had in the very gender-appropriation of those tired four-letter words: dick, fuck, tits, shit, etc.

The other part of my problem is that (b) the vexed is-

sue of assimilationist, proto-ethnic Jewish identity has undergone changes since the glory days of Lenny Bruce and Catskill hotels, although you wouldn't know it by reading *Operation Shylock*. Roth's still talking "Goodbye Columbus," nouveau-riche Jews with groaning refrigerators—as though nothing has intervened in some forty-odd years of looking and listening except for the canny idea to put a Hebrew epigram on his latest book. (Why Hebrew, when, by his own admission, he doesn't retain a word of the language from his restless after-school studies in the "small, ill-ventilated classroom" of a Newark Hebrew school? Why, except for the fact that Roth has caught on—and yes, there are some things he still takes in—that High Seriousness in an American-Jewish Writer no longer means a sprinkling of "colorful, rich, vernacular" Yiddish and immersion in Henry James and Lionel Trilling; High Seriousness means Going Back to the Sources, a sprinkling of pristine Hebrew and immersion in Aharon Appelfeld and the Chafetz Chaim. No one said the man wasn't smart.)

One would think that, with the completion of his Zuckerman trilogy and the books that came afterward, Philip Roth might have finished with the business of cogitating on The Paradox of Being Philip Roth—musing, in agitated and often beguiling fashion, on the intractability of selfhood, on, as he put it a whole shelf-load of books ago in *My Life As a Man*: "You being you! And me! This me who is me being me and none other!" Through the magnifying loop of refracted, mirrored, meta- and semi-selves, Roth has tackled the conundrum of what lies "beneath the disguise of me" —"the universal urge to be otherwise"—at exhaustive and increasingly insistent length. There has, in this writer's work, been less and less effort to provide what he was once so noticeably good at—i.e., the stuff of fiction, the look, feel, sounds, and tastes of things. Israel might as well be London, might as well be a study in Connecticut for all we learn of them, except as a backdrop for Roth's interior drama.

Indeed, if the flurry of publicity attending the publication of *Operation Shylock*, with its intimations that the author had taken up a new career as a Mossad spy, led you to envision a different and far-ranging Mr. Roth, unfasten your seatbelts, dear reader, you're in for a very unbumpy ride. *Shylock* is dizzyingly, almost embarrassingly self-referential. (Maybe this is what you get for having your *tuchas* kissed too much as a child? "They all adored you," says the diligent imposter known as "Philip Roth," who carries a full mental dossier on the real Philip Roth's life, just in case we don't. "Your mother, your Aunt Mim, your Aunt Honey, your Grandma Finkel—when you were a tot they used to stand around the crib, and when your mother changed your diaper, they used to take turns kissing your *tuchas*...")

Maybe there is something to be said, artistically speaking, for a sliver of deprivation—of, at the least, inattention? Under all its "sacrosanct pranks," its theories of Diasporism and relentless sighting of Jewish culprits, here and in Israel, its musings on fiction versus reality, on imposterhood and the Eternal *Doppelgänger* who lies in wait, this book features Roth at his old, intellectually onanistic best, trying once again to "subdue the inner quarrel."

As for Roth's generous peppering of his text with real-life events—the Demjanjuk trial, the Achille Lauro incident, the Klinghoffers themselves, the Intifada, the Holocaust, the Pollard case, the initial reception to Herzl's dream of a Jewish homeland. . . . It's as though, late in his writing life, he's discovered that there was more to this Jewish story than the version he was fed back in Newark. If he has seen fit to move on from chopped herring salad to a more substantive and not entirely risible Judaism, there is still little of the Israel I know that is recognizable in these pages, despite the carefully transliterated Hebrew phrases, just as neither Israeli nor American Jewry seem true-to-contemporary-life.

Much of *Operation Shylock* appears cynically conceived, verging on the exploitative. Except by way of the King David Hotel and meetings with prominent Israeli authors and credential-bearing Palestinians, it doesn't seem to me that Roth has bothered to stoop to understand the indigenous Middle-Eastern situation. If I were living in Israel—if I were my sister, say, who lives in Jerusalem with her American husband and four American-born children despite ongoing doubts and criticism—I would despise this book. As someone whose emotional investment is safely tallied from these shores, I merely dislike it.

Daphne Merkin is the author of Enchantment (1986) which won the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for best Jewish-American novel. She is at work on a second novel, The Discovery of Sex, to be published by Poseidon Press.

Morris Dickstein

Do you really expect me to take "Diasporism" seriously when Philip Roth doesn't propose it seriously? Diasporism is Roth's way of defending himself for living in America, for not making Aliyah. Does this need defending? When I was growing up, in the shadow of the Holocaust, Zionists were always telling me that Israel was the only safe and authentic place to be a Jew. Never again should Jews be trapped as unwelcome guests in someone else's state. I spent years in Hebrew-speaking schools and summer camps acquiring the culture

that presumably would make me feel at home once I got to the promised land. I remember a fiery speech by David Ben-Gurion at the Jewish Theological Seminary—a speech he must have given a thousand times—castigating the illusion that Jewish life could continue indefinitely outside Israel.

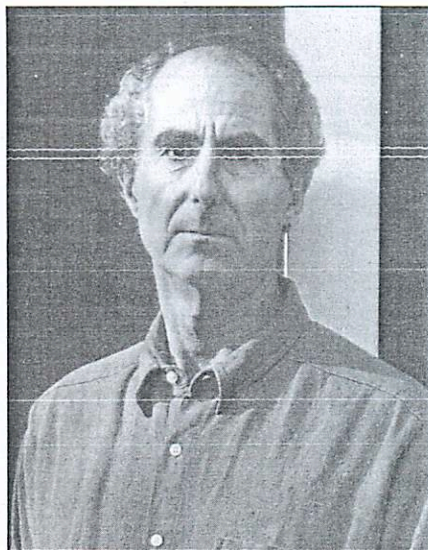
When Philip Roth began visiting Israel he was no doubt put through the same wringer. Some of these conversations made their way into *The Counterlife* (1987). “They kept wanting me to explain why American Jews persist in living in the Diaspora,” says Nathan Zuckerman, “and I couldn’t answer. . . Does anybody know? Can anyone answer?” Diasporism is Roth’s tongue-

in-cheek answer. It’s not only a rebuttal to Zionism but a mischievous parody of it, with its own Law of Return, casting Israel itself as the vulnerable and suffocating Jewish ghetto. Like Zionism, it ignores the hostility of the indigenous population. The people of Berlin and Bucharest, Warsaw and Odessa, are no more likely to welcome back the Jews than the Palestinians did.

No one visiting such places today can fail to be moved by the eloquent Jewish absence, the void that was once the heart of a busy cultural life. I remember my fury at seeing a plaque on a bank in Ulm commemorating the destruction of the Great Synagogue, once located on that site, and the unexplained “departure of our Jewish fellow-citizens”—Ulm, home to Jews since the Middle Ages, birthplace of Albert Einstein! I hear that today in Poland—a land that pioneered anti-Semitism without Jews—everything Jewish has suddenly become intellectually fashionable.

We can’t help feeling a poignant nostalgia for the murdered culture of European Jews. Roth has republished some of their books in his “Writers From the Other Europe” series. But the Diasporism of Roth’s activist alter-ego has nothing to do with today’s Europe, everything to do with America. It’s an apologia for the secular, assimilated American Jew, a defense of America as the true promised land, where kids from the Lower East Side and Newark could grow up in safety and freedom, could become rich and famous and play a genuine role in Western culture. Roth feels uneasy enough about this need for self-justification to exaggerate it satirically and put it in the mouth of his manic, deranged double; and he chooses as spokesman for his attack on Zionism a Palestinian-American intellectual who has made his own unhappy Aliyah, a man whose brilliance is clotted with hatred and fantasies of revenge.

Part of this man’s role is to flatter his old friend Roth as



a loyal son and critic of the Jews and defend him against the guilt-trips of the Israelis: “These provincial nobodies look down on you. Can you imagine it? There is more Jewish spirit and Jewish laughter and Jewish intelligence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan than in this entire country... there’s more Jewish heart at the knish counter at Zabar’s than in the whole of the Knesset!”

Fortunately, this is a false choice. The Jews of Israel are neither so terminally threatened nor so intolerant as Roth imagines; few American Jews are this desperate to justify themselves. The Zionists thought they were creating a new kind of man, but the resur-

gence of Orthodox Judaism underlines Israel’s continuity with Jewish history. Though Roth’s work has become more Jewish over the past decade, partly because of his contacts with Israel, the assimilation he defends has made many Americans far less Jewish, often not Jewish at all. His promised land is not the real life of American Jews, which he has mercilessly satirized, but a circle of literary friends, a skein of precious memories, and a pantheon of favorite writers.

Most of us feel no need to choose between the knish counter and the Knesset. We know how insubstantial knish-counter Judaism can be. We would shudder before suggesting “transference” and “resettlement” even as metaphorical solutions to the Jewish problem, despite the voluntary Israeli diaspora that already exists from Paris to Sydney. Luckily, Roth’s talky novel is a collection of spiky riffs that disarm criticism with comedy and give us (in good Jewish fashion) five sides to every point. At least no one can say the book isn’t provocative.

Morris Dickstein’s books include Gates of Eden (Penguin) and, most recently, Double Agent (Oxford).

Anita Norich

Having indeed tried to put the “id back in Yid,” Philip Roth seems now to be turning his attention to the second half of his decades-long quest: putting the “oy back in goy.” This time, we have Anti-Semites Anonymous, an organization devoted to the cure of anti-Semitism. Confess, repent, form communities of anti-Semites, know that this is

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a disease for which there is no cure but which you must fight anew each day. This to the goyim. And the parallel disease for Jews seems, in this novel at least, to be Zionism, a belief that the Jews can form a normal nation, that they can find a home of their own and be safe in it. Instead, Jews must embrace Diasporism, the ideology that urges Ashkenazim to return to the Europe Hitler hoped to leave *Judenrein*, a Europe now eager to welcome them back and thus undo twentieth-century history.

But how are we to respond to Diasporism? On the one hand it is the philosophy of a drugged, dying madman and is as insane as he is. Or it is a perversion perpetrated by Israel's Mossad which creates "PR" in order to entice Philip Roth into espionage activities that are suppressed in the novel. Or not. On the other hand, as we are reminded, Zionism and "transfer" (the plan urging Israel to deport its Palestinian population) were both deemed mad when first proposed. Presented as an ideology whose motives are the preservation of Jewish lives, Jewish culture and well-being, and the enrichment of a tragically depleted Europe, Diasporism is meant to be redemptive. Even if it were not the product of insanity or delusion, readers tempted to take it seriously would find all sorts of obvious problems with it, not least of which is the question of where it leaves that part of Israel's population who do not come from Europe and thus cannot redeem that past.

Although unacknowledged by any of the novel's characters, what readers may find most disturbing about Diasporism is the extent to which it posits Israel as perfectly *negotiable*. It's not territory or Palestinian rights that must be negotiated; nor is it the fate or identity of Palestinians, anti-Semites, Demjanjuk, Jews, or even Philip Roth that is in question. Instead, we encounter Israel as a forty-year mistake, a short blip in the trajectory of Jewish history, a curiosity but not a living, complicated nation-state.

Roth reminds us throughout this book that he doesn't mean it, that the views of his characters are not necessarily his own, that the imagination must be given free rein, that his is, after all, a fictional account. And, in the end, that even such formulaic disclaimers are false. "*Im tirtzu, ein zo agada*" [If you will it, it is not a legend, or fiction], the familiar Zionist song proclaims, echoing Theodor Herzl. Surprisingly, Roth may now be singing that tune too. □

Anita Norich is associate professor of Yiddish and English literature at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *The Homeless Imagination in the Fiction of Israel Joshua Singer*.

LETTY

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serve recognition for it. Furthermore, after all is said and done, this film is *about* Black soldiers in the Second World War. Jews, for all our centrality in our own history, are the film's supporting cast.

Other rages may be motivating the more rabid critics (like those who call in to Bob Grant or Rush Limbaugh). White racists and anti-Semites enjoy nothing so much as watching Jews and Blacks fight it out in public. Some Jews are still punishing Blacks for Louis Farrakhan. Others—and not just Jews—are out to weaken Jesse Jackson and David Dinkins, whose support for the film is being recast as guilt-by-association now that there is an accuracy scandal. The people who held the mayor responsible for the Crown Heights riot and the Lemrick Nelson verdict, who call him an anti-Semite at public hearings, or circulate "WANTED" posters bearing his picture will jump at anything to hurt Dinkins.

Defending the mayor or Jesse Jackson would be easier had they shown more willingness to struggle publicly and unequivocally against anti-Semitism in their own community. Unfair accusations of anti-Semitism against the mayor led him to appear on television and in many New York synagogues making passionate statements defending his record. But what he did not do was to use the Crown Heights struggle to raise consciousness among African Americans about why they should be engaged in education against anti-Semitism in the Black community. Black political leaders should not leave it to scholars such as Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to condemn hate speech before it festers into hate crimes, or to confront Black anti-Semitism as forcefully as they confront white racism. Jews who suspected that Dinkins and Jackson were using "Liberators" as a substitute for really confronting Black anti-Semitism may have sympathized with attempts to torpedo the film.

Finally, some critics of "Liberators" may be using the cover of cultural disputation to join the general backlash against anticipated Black economic progress under the Clinton administration. Salvos that sound respectable in intellectual discourse may mask a pre-emptive effort to cut Blacks down to size before the pendulum swings in their direction.

Whether my speculations are right or not, anyone concerned about the political manipulation of intra-group rivalry ought to be alert to the hidden agendas at the heart of the "Liberators" controversy. The film presents us with a problem of ethical slippage and well-intentioned embellishment, not a hoax. Truth must be defended, yes; but so must the liberal vision of Black advancement and the struggle for Black-Jewish harmony. □