

The Identity Problem in Malamud's *The Fixer*

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Masayuki Teranishi

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I

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of Malamud's protagonists is that they are all mediocre heroes. Roy Hobbs in *The Natural*, Frankie Alpine in *The Assistant*, Sy Levin in *A New Life*, and Yakov Bok in *The Fixer* are all struggling to compensate for past failure, not realizing that it could make them stronger. Their shared problem is "seeking, through a maze of social and philosophical blind-alleys, for a reattainment of self."¹ Each discards his old self and attempts to find a new one. Roy tries to forget his past mistake with "the mysterious woman" and attempts to find a new identity on the baseball field. Frank has been suffering from his past crime. In order to atone for it, he is looking for a purpose of living in his job at Morris Bober's grocery store. Levin is a former drunkard and attempts to find a new self out of the ruins of his past. However, the more they try to find a new identity, the more they suffer.

Yakov is a typical character who cannot find his "new self." To him, loss of self means loss of identity as a Jew. What he has seen and experienced in the shtetl has made him sceptical about the Jewish God and Bok "blames fate and spares himself."² Therefore, to Yakov, the shtetl appears to be merely a prison. In leaving there, he is fully prepared to give up his identity as a Jew. This feeling is represented in the fact that he leaves there without visiting his parents' grave. In the same manner, he cherishes his contempt for pious and traditional Jews.

They drove by the poorhouse, a shabby structure with an addition for orphans, which Yakov averted his eyes from, then clop-clopped across a wooden bridge into the populous section of the town.³

It is clear that Yakov is disgusted with his life in the shtetl. There it seems eternally impossible for the poor to escape from their poverty. He attempts to ignore the past by turning his eyes away from the poorhouse and towards the town. By deviating from the Jewish code he tells himself again and again that he must abandon his Jewish identity to be successful in Kiev. Consequently, he dares to break a

traditional code. He departs on the day before the Sabbath.

After arriving at Kiev, Yakov acts in the same manner. Determined not to repeat his past failures any longer, he attempts to compensate via material success. In assessing Malamud's characters, money is a most important factor. In *The Assistant*, there are some Jews who succeed in the world by earning money. One is Jurious Karp who is the owner of the liquor store. He gets a liquor licence in a fraudulent manner. Karp's role corresponds to that of Gronfein Gregor in *The Fixer*. He is arrested on the charge of swindling and soon gets out of the prison by bribing wardens. These are typical Jews who have become rich at the risk of the Jewish code. As Iska Alter points out, their society has deceived them about "what is to be truly valued in life."⁴

Yakov almost loses this code, too. After he saves an old man Nikolai Maximovitch Lebedev, he is offered a reward and is championed by him and his daughter Zinaida Nikolaevna Lebedev. But Nikolai is a member of the Black Hundred, the ultra-anti-Semite group. Yakov well knows that it is dangerous to accept any kindness from him and he hesitates in deciding what to do. But, for him, money is a matter of great urgency and he cannot forget Zinaida's words, "more than mere thanks."⁵ To Yakov, her words seem to imply large amounts of money. So he accepts the offer and visits their house. When Bok meets them there, his reward turns out to be the job of fixing their house. It seems to be an attractive offer because they are going to pay forty roubles. Yakov accepts this in the hope of escaping from poverty.

As the first job has been done very successfully, he is offered another one. It is to look out for Nikolai's interests in his brick company. Having little experience of work as an overseer, Bok feels worried about this. However, he takes the offer, again because of his desire to earn money.

But the more money Yakov gets, the more he comes to spend, and its value becomes lower and lower to him ;

He went through a more confident period, when for the first time in his life he spent money as though it was nothing more than money.⁶

As Yuro Teshima points out, true Jewish people would know how to put up with poverty to protect their independence and freedom.⁷ They have faith that they have to act like human beings even in the depths of hardship. But Yakov's behaviour is contradictory to this belief. He tries to make money and steady his life at the risk of his independence and freedom. What is worse, once Bok gets money he makes light of the spirit of thrift which is an important part of the Jewish code. Consequently, this leads him into a critical situation.

Due to waste of money, it becomes temporarily impossible for Yakov to continue with his way of life. He tries to bake bread to save money. As a result, the flour he stocks in his room is confiscated and he is suspected of baking matzo for passover. Thus he invites suspicion. This shows how Yakov is cornered into a difficult situation by departing from the Jewish code.

In spite of Yakov's immoral behaviour in Kiev, the most critical moment for him is earlier when he meets a boatman at the Dnieper. Bok finds that the boatman harbours prejudice against, and

misunderstanding and hatred of the Jews. So he cannot reveal his identity as a Jew to the boatman although he makes a firm decision to discard his past self as a born sufferer. Symbolically, Yakov throws his bag of "prayer things" into the river for fear that the boatman will discern his Jewish identity.

Yet, however hard Bok tries, he cannot completely erase his Jewish identity. Since his wife Raisl left him, he has not made love to anyone, so he is easily tempted by Zinaida, although he is taught that a Russian woman would never knowingly accept advances from a Jew. But when he finds that she is menstruating, he turns down her offer of love-making. He contrasts her uncleanness with his wife's holiness. Also, Bok cannot pass over an old Jew beaten by children and helps him. In short he cannot completely disobey his Jewish code.

This ineffectual position is most symbolically shown in scenes where Yakov is offered food and drink. Before he leaves the shtetl, he drinks a last glass of tea with Shmuel. At that time he refuses the sweets offered by his father-in-law Shmuel. In his strong attitude toward Shmuel we can see his firm resolution to abandon his Jewish identity. But on his way to Kiev, he thinks ; "Ah, for some tea, or if not that, some sweetened hot water."⁸ This seems to imply that he wishes to return to his hometown, and is symbolically hesitant to discard his identity as a Jew. When he begins to work as an overseer, he is impatient to eat sweets again.

One night, feeling an overwhelming hunger for sweets, he bought himself a thick bar of chocolate.⁹

Now Yakov feels exhausted because he is inexperienced in the job as overseer. He finds his workmates falsely record the number of blocks they deal with and warns them against their theft. But they regard Yakov as a mere newcomer and take a defiant attitude toward him. He loses his confidence in his job but cannot find any one to fall back upon. Consequently, he feels lonely, surrounded by anti-Semites. The sweets he craves represent reminders of his hometown, as well as food to physically sustain him.

There are also scenes in which Yakov wanders off searching for a faith to live for. In some cases his position is described symbolically. For example, early in the novel, Bok happens to see an old woman pilgrim and gives her a lift in his wagon. But the vehicle breaks and she runs away without looking back at him. When he catches up with her to apologize, the wagon breaks again. Though his intention to help her is humane and honourable, it has not been recognized by her and his good deed becomes rather ambiguous. The following words symbolically indicate his position : "Behind him was the empty treeless steppe, ahead the old woman."¹⁰ It seems reasonable to say that "treeless steppe" and "the old woman" imply his valueless life and his goal as an ideal man respectively. He wanders between them without knowing his own position.

In other cases this ambivalent position is also symbolically represented with regard to his Jewishness. "His nose was sometimes Jewish, sometimes not."¹¹ This description implies that he cannot completely give up his identity as a Jew nor accept it as his fundamental personality. Yakov, unwilling to live as a Jew, may symbolize modern protagonists forced to live a fruitless life such as Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, Eugene Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King* and Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run*. So it is

interesting to consider that the word “Jewish” might imply a superior value for people to seek in such a hopeless world.

II

Although Yakov cannot completely relinquish his Jewish identity, neither can he accept this fact unquestioningly. So Bok needs the affliction in the prison to rediscover his identity. As Ben Siegel suggests, sufferings are “aids not barriers to grasping one’s true identity.”¹² To Yakov, only suffering can make him realize the significance of the fundamental truth that he is a Jew.

Philip Roth comments on the meaning of Jewishness in Malamud’s works. As he points out, after reading *The Fixer* and *The Assistant* we cannot but hold a biased feeling about the Jew and the gentile: the former is “innocent, passive, virtuous” and the latter is “corrupt, violent, and lustful.”¹³ But it is obvious that Malamud did not write these two novels purely for revenge on the gentiles. He insisted that “a writer must create out of the world he knows.”¹⁴ He deals with Jews because he understands their predicament. So it will be possible to consider Yakov’s hardship and discovery of “Jewishness” at the universal level.

In spite of Bok’s seemingly contemptuous view of the Jews, his consciousness of being a Jew is deep-rooted. This is due to his childhood experiences. A pogrom had much influence on his childhood and his father was senselessly murdered by two drunken soldiers. Yakov manages to survive the subsequent pogrom as a boy. Then he sees a shocking scene.

On the third morning when the houses were still smouldering and he was led, with a half dozen other children, out of a cellar where they had been hiding he saw a black-bearded Jew with a white sausages stuffed into his mouth, lying in the road on a pile of bloody feathers, a peasant’s pig devouring his arm.¹⁵

It seems reasonable to regard the “white sausages” as phallic symbols. Yakov is appalled at the scene, and can never forget the soldiers’ ferocious deed. He realizes that he cannot escape from this tragic fate as long as he is a Jew, and he also perceives the injustice of the cruel treatment against the Jews. He makes up his mind to fight against such iniquity.

As Yakov denies his involvement in Jewish ritual, Prosecuting Attorney Grubeshov suspects that he was compelled to commit the crime on behalf of other Jews. So Grubeshov takes advantage of Yakov’s antipathy against the Jews. He suggests to Bok that he will be paroled if he admits his relationship to the Jewish institution. However, Yakov cannot blame the crime on innocent people. In spite of Grubeshov’s repeated threats, Yakov refuses to confess. Nobody but Yakov can go to the trial to prove the absurdity of the discrimination against the Jews. So he persists in rejecting the offer of amnesty and claims a fair trial. Bok manages to survive all the ill-treatment because of his desire to vindicate the Jewish position. What upholds his firm attitude may be his strong identification with the Jews, which he has almost

forgotten due to despair over his fate as an unlucky Jew. His strong resolution means his realization of significance of existence. Ironically it is when he is coerced into betraying other Jews that he becomes strongly aware of his fundamental origin.

Here again we may recognize a clue concerning Malamud's own "Jewishness." As mentioned above, for Yakov, the discovery of Jewishness implies the simultaneous discovery of his self, and his new faith to fall back on. Like Yakov, many of Malamud's protagonists are "seeking for a reattainment of self."¹⁶ Frank in *The Assistant* finds his life's purpose in helping Morris Bober's daughter Helen and his bereaved wife Ida, Levin in *A New Life* finds his in his love for Pauline. They are never successes in the real world. But they successfully define their individual identities by choosing to live as losers.

As Yakov begins to recognize his inseparable relationship with the Jews, he grows to be unselfish. The scene which most strongly and symbolically shows his acceptance of fate and subsequent spiritual growth is when his wife Raisl visits him in the prison. Then he acknowledges his culpability, over the failure of their marriage, in having stopped sleeping with his wife. Yakov is asked to acknowledge her illegitimate child. Sandy Cohen suggests that this is "the supreme test of his maturing self-transcendence."¹⁷ At last he accepts her offer. This implies that he will return to his hometown after his release. In so much, Yakov symbolically regains his identity as a Jew.

In Malamud's novels, becoming a father symbolizes the end of the quest for identity. Although Roy Hobbs in *The Natural* knows that Iris Lemon is pregnant with his child, he leaves her. On the other hand, Sy Levin in *A New Life* acknowledges Pauline's adopted children and their unborn baby. Levin and Yakov can take responsibility for what they have done in the past. By doing so, they make their pasts meaningful. We may detect, in these two characters, the confidence of men who have actively sought to regain their own "identity."

There are multiple father-son relationships in Malamud's fictions. We may call them teacher-disciple bonds. In *The Fixer*, at first Yakov assimilates the ideas of Shmuel, who is one of Yakov's symbolic teachers. However, it is not until he achieves what his dead "teachers" could not do that Bok's suffering becomes meaningful. Yakov has already known better than Shmuel who stays in the shtetl without knowing the terror of a pogrom, because he realizes the extent of injustice in Russia. Now he is trying to challenge another dead "teacher" Bibikov who surrendered to the plot of the cruel Grubeshov and committed suicide. Bok accomplishes it by enduring hardship in order to attain justice, which Bibikov could not realize.

Finally he says to himself ;

After all, he knows the people ; and he believes in their right to be Jews and live in the world like men. He is against those who are against them. He will protect them to the extent that he can. This is his covenant with himself. If God's not a man he has to be.¹⁸

Now that Yakov can see what will be the fate of powerless Jews, he makes a resolution to devote himself to improving conditions. Yakov realizes that he is involved more deeply than others, but accepts his fate

as such. He is a typically selfish man, always worried about money and thinking about his own welfare. However, when he finally becomes aware of the value of Jewish history Yakov becomes sympathetic to other Jews. This is an important step in Yakov's growth. Moreover, he begins to think of politics as the means to realize his ideal. In reality, as George P. Elliott points out, there appears to be no political hope under autocratic government.¹⁹ It is very likely that his resistance will end in vain. However, Yakov can find something to live for even in a hopelessly corrupted society.

Besides his own stupidity of attempting to escape from his fate, Bok also recognizes the absurdity of traditional Jews who seem to wait for the tragedy without knowing that the terror of the pogrom is pressing on the shtetl. Though his achievement through sufferings is represented by submission to his fate as a born-Jewish-sufferer, his newly-found faith is not heavenly, but at the worldly level. The following citation most clearly shows his change of attitude.

One thing I've learned, he thought, there's no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. You can't be one without the other, that's clear enough. You can't sit still and see yourself destroyed.²⁰

At an earlier stage, Yakov affirms that he is not "a political person."²¹ But now he knows that there will be inevitably more victims like himself, unless the whole society can be reformed. He also realizes that in order to accomplish such improvement he must take part in society and resort to political means. We may say that ultimately, Bok accepts his identity positively by recognition of the nature of his political role in an anti-Semite country.

Therefore, Bok's concern is no longer solely with the Jewish problem. First, Yakov accepts his duty as a Jew and then as a citizen. Saul Bellow refers to "the reality of the threat to civilization and to our own existence," and "our duty to struggle and resist."²² Yakov perceives both of these factors through his hardship. He feels that "suffering has taught [him] the uselessness of suffering."²³ But it has deprived him of his arrogance and made him realize what to do in order ultimately to bring peace to Russia. Disappointed at the severity of society, Malamud's other protagonists such as Roy, Frank and Levin find their identity outside of society. On the other hand, Yakov is unique in accomplishing his identity quest by redefining his position *in* society.

Notes

- 1 Sidney Richman, *Bernard Malamud* ed. Sylvia E. Bowman. (Boston : Twayne Publisher, Inc., 1966) 24
- 2 Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer* (1966 ; London : Penguin, 1968) 12
- 3 Malamud, 17
- 4 Iska Alter, "The Good Man's Dilemma : 'The Natural,' 'The Assistant,' and American Materialism." *Critical Essays on Bernard Malamud* ed. and introd. Joel Salzberg (Boston : G. K. Hall

- and Co. , 1987) 81
- 5 Malamud, 36
- 6 Malamud, 61
- 7 Jacob Yuroh Teshima, *Yudayajin wa Naze Yushu ka* (What's Behind Jewish Excellence?) ed. Katsuo Yamura (Tokyo : The Simul Press, Inc. , 1979) 32
- 8 Malamud, 23
- 9 Malamud, 61
- 10 Malamud, 24
- 11 Malamud, 12
- 12 Ben Siegal, "Through a Glass Darkly : Bernard Malamud's Painful Views of the Self." *The Fiction of Bernard Malamud* ed. Richard Astro and Jackson J. Benson. (Oregon : State University Press, 1977) 122
- 13 Philip Roth, "From `Imagining Jews. ´" Salzberg 98
- 14 Mark Goldman, "Comic Vision and the Theme of Identity." *Bernard Malamud and the Critics* ed. and introd. Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field. (New York : New York UP, 1970) 154
- 15 Malamud, 8
- 16 Richman, 24
- 17 Sandy Cohen, *Bernard Malamud and the Trial by Love* ed. Robert Brainard Pearsall (Amsterdam : Rodopi N. V. , 1974) 85
- 18 Malamud, 246
- 19 George P. Elliot, "Yakov's Ordeal." Salzberg 46
- 20 Malamud, 299
- 21 Malamud, 45
- 22 Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976 ; London : Penguin, 1985) 95
- 23 Malamud, 298