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I

MICHAEL P. KRAMER

Beginnings and ends: the origins of Jewish American literary history

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

(Genesis 1:1)

Rabbi Isaac said: He did not have to begin the Torah but with, “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months” [Exodus 12:2], which is the first commandment that Israel was commanded. So why did He open with, “In the beginning”? Because of this: “He hath declared to His people the power of His works, to give them the heritage of the nations” [Psalms 111:6]. So if the nations of the world would say to Israel, “You are thieves, since you have conquered the lands of the seven nations,” they could say to them: “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, Blessed be He. He created it and gave it to whom He saw fit. According to His will, he gave it to them; and according to His will, He took it from them and gave it to us.”

(Rashi on Genesis 1:1)

It may seem self-evident that the Bible should begin “in the beginning.” But Rashi, the quintessential medieval Jewish exegete, did not think so. He plainly understood a thousand years ago what we post-moderns think only we have discovered, that every narrative has a purpose, that every beginning is a means to an end.

The Bible begins at the beginning, Rashi tells us, because, in narrative terms, it will eventually take the Children of Israel not only to the foot of Mount Sinai but also to the banks of the Jordan – because, in terms of genre, it is not only a book of laws but also a national chronicle, a historical defense of sovereignty. Cosmogony legitimates conquest.

Why does Rashi begin his commentary with this particular gloss? Here, too, the answer is not self-evident. Plainly, his meditation on biblical beginnings had no practical political purpose: a millennium had passed since Jewish sovereignty ceased in Judea; another millennium would go by before the idea of return to a Jewish national homeland would become a serious political option. Surely religious law was more immediately relevant to medieval, diasporic Jews. Rashi could have begun in other ways – with

a grammatical analysis of the prepositional phrase, “In the beginning,” say, or with homiletical readings of key words such as “beginning” and “God.” (Both, in fact, follow his initial gloss.) Moreover, none of the earlier midrashic compilations in which Rabbi Isaac’s gloss appears, and upon which Rashi drew, position the gloss so prominently. So why does Rashi begin with the question of sovereignty?

Writing in France at the end of the eleventh century, the Crusades looming or already begun, Rashi may very well have chosen this beginning because sovereignty never seemed so far away (Sicherman and Gevaryahu, “Rashi and the First Crusade”). He may have felt he needed to reiterate at that moment of crisis what was, after all, a central tenet of Jewish faith, that the children of Israel – despite being politically powerless, dispersed among the nations, caught between cross and crescent – were still God’s chosen people and the true heirs of Canaan. In this light, the gloss may be seen as a calmly defiant call to peer past the competing claims of Christians and Moslems, to look beyond the centuries of exile and alterity, to rise above the violence and victimization, to climb the *Pisgah* heights of textual intention and see the promised land. “He took it from *them*,” Rashi writes, “and gave it to *us*.” Not only to our ancestors, he implies, but even to *us*. Even in exile. Even though we can do nothing about it. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, and in the end He would restore the Jews to Zion. Contemporary history has little relevance, Rashi seems to suggest, when God’s overarching plot is taken into account, when the ends are authorized in the beginning.

Why begin a discussion of the origins of Jewish American literary history with Rashi? Certainly there are other options. A recent textbook anthology of Jewish American literature (Chametzky et al., *Jewish American Literature*), for instance, begins reasonably with a petition penned by the early Jewish settlers in New Amsterdam to grant them civil rights – fitting prelude to a sanguine, forward-looking narrative of Jewish achievement in America. Earlier studies begin with non-Jewish perceptions of the Jew in early American literature (Mersand, *Traditions in American Literature*, Harap, *The Image of the Jew*), as if Jewish American creativity were born in ethnic self-consciousness and Jewish American literary history were a story of the gradual rise of self-confidence and self-expression. Beginning with Rashi anticipates a different kind of Jewish American story, one that necessarily begins *in medias res*. To be sure, not all works of Jewish American literature derive immediately from the cultural tradition represented by Rashi’s commentary. Some do, among them works I discuss in this chapter. But the vast majority of literature discussed throughout this volume does not. Nor is such a beginning meant to suggest that only those works that somehow

preserve or engage pre-American Jewish tradition (Rashi's or some other) deserve inclusion in Jewish American literary history: such privileging not only would greatly limit but would also distort the range and variety of the literature produced by Jews in America. To take the long view is neither to make a moral judgment nor to chart an exclusivist cultural tradition but to suggest an historiographical approach: to take the measure of Jewish literary creativity by using the tape of the past, even when that creativity amounts to cultural discontinuity or abandonment.

As such, beginning with Rashi serves a twofold purpose. First, Rashi offers us an instance of medieval Jewish thinking about Jewish history and destiny against which later instances of Jewish thought can be compared and contrasted. Second, he also presents us with a way of thinking about Jewish *literary* history. Indeed, the imaginative force of Rashi's beginning, his view of Jewish history and destiny, is sustained by and conditioned upon the implicit history of Jewish literature embedded in his text. He explains why the Bible begins at the beginning by tracing his commentary back to *its* interpretative origins. His genealogical claim ("He gave it to *us*") is reinforced by an exegetical chain: he glosses Rabbi Isaac's earlier midrash, which glosses Psalms 111 as a gloss on Genesis 1. Rashi begins, in other words, by situating himself within a continuous and ongoing literary tradition. His commentary seems to suggest that Jewish literary history – or, as he no doubt understood it, *mesorah*, the transmission of tradition – looks toward the future by throwing the Jews back upon their covenantal origins and keeping land, lineage, and law linked imaginatively together. His meditation on beginnings draws its imaginative force from its own belatedness, its reliance on earlier texts, its *unoriginality*: the unbroken textual tradition effectually substitutes for, and thus defies the vicissitudes of, the political history of the Jews.

Centuries later, when Jewish scholars in Germany (and later in England and America) laid the groundwork for modern Jewish literary historiography, something like Rashi's notion of the compensatory value of literary history resurfaces. The literary traditions of other peoples were defined by shared territory and common language, it was widely held, but Jewish literature flourished despite the absence of these elements. For these early scholars of Jewish studies (known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums*), the expanded Jewish literary tradition was the "portable fatherland" (Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, 1, xv) of the Jews, the sign and guarantor of their national survival during exile. To begin the story of modern Jewish literature in the pre-modern Jewish past is not to state the obvious but, with Rashi, to defy the evident differences between past and present. But while the rift that Rashi's commentary sought to bridge was temporal, spatial, political, and lamented, the rupture that modern Jewish literary history tried to repair

was also cultural – and, ironically, much desired. It is by now a commonplace that modern Jewish history is marked by a break with the past – often deliberate, even radical – and these scholars supported the modernization of Jewish religion, culture, and society. Their task was to see the changes in Judaism as continuity – an act of insight or imagination often bolder than Rashi's. It is one thing for Rashi to identify himself with Rabbi Isaac, another to see the spirit of Moses Maimonides in Benedict Spinoza, or that of Isaiah in Karl Marx. To call modern Jewish literature Jewish is more often than not to speak metonymically, to substitute a discerned (or imagined) Jewish part for the complex cultural whole. To locate modern Jewish writing within the same history as, say, Rashi and Rabbi Isaac is to make a political assertion as much as a cultural observation, one that may obscure as much as it clarifies (Kramer, "Race").

To imagine Jewish *American* literature in terms of continuity is even more of an intellectual feat. Much of early Jewish American history is also marked by a break with the past, a break exacerbated by America's distance from established Jewish communities, by the lack of a central religious and communal authority, and, after the Revolution, by American ideology. European nationalism threw Europeans back upon their past and generated a parallel response from their Jews; American ideology trumpeted a break with the past. If early Jewish literary historiography is haunted by the question of continuity, the American quest for literary nationality is fueled by the ideological imperative of autochthony. Again and again in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we hear the obsessive call for American writers to throw off the chains of European influence. "We have listened too long," Emerson wrote, "to the courtly muses of Europe" ("The American Scholar," 62). As if it were possible to imagine American literature as anything but a branch of English literature. As if the Pilgrims left all their cultural baggage on board the *Mayflower* when they stepped on to Plymouth Rock. As if Emerson invented the essay, or Hawthorne the romance, or Whitman the epic. In short, the question of beginnings is answered differently in America than in Europe: if the point of Jewish literary history is to look beyond rupture to connection, the point of American literary history is to look through connection to rupture. If the central question of early Jewish literary discourse has to do with cultural continuities, with belatedness and indebtedness, the central question of early American literary discourse has to do with originality and self-sufficiency – not what makes it the same but what makes it different.

In a sense, early Jewish American writers and thinkers found themselves in a conceptual bind, looking backward to Jewish origins and forward to American vistas. I offer this dilemma heuristically, as a preliminary way of thinking of the beginnings of Jewish writing in America – of the first two

centuries of sermons, orations, poems, and novels that Jews of the Sephardic and German waves of immigration wrote – and of the diverse and divergent sources of the literature. For the theme of this chapter is the concept of origins as it emerges in early Jewish American writing, the various ways Jews in America tried to make sense of America’s place in Jewish history and the place of the Jews in America.

Judah Monis (1683–1764), an Italian Jew probably of Portuguese descent, was the first Jewish man of letters in America, publishing a volume of religious discourses (*The Truth, The Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth*) in 1722 and *A Grammar of the Hebrew Tongue* in 1735. He was also the first Jewish faculty member at Harvard, placing him at the beginning of a distinguished Jewish American tradition (Klingenstein, *Jews in the American Academy*, 1–2). Moreover, Monis was probably the first serious representative of traditional Jewish learning in America: he reportedly “studied in the Jewish academies of Leghorn and Amsterdam” and was “truly read and learned in the Jewish Cabals and Rabbins, a Master and Critic in the Hebrew” (Kramer, “The Conversion of the Jews,” 178). His writings evidence an ability to quote the Bible, the Talmud, and various midrashic and kabbalistic texts, along with a slew of medieval Jewish philosophical and exegetical works – including, to be sure, Rashi. In the end, however, Monis became a Christian.

Or, to be more exact, a New England Puritan. When Monis arrived in Boston in 1720 he entered a society remarkable for its passionate, multi-layered fascination with the Jews. To begin with, the Puritans, like other Christians, read the Hebrew scriptures typologically, as adumbrations of Christian experience: they understood the Israelite exodus from Egypt, their wanderings through the wilderness, and their conquest of the Promised Land of Canaan as foreshadowings of Christ, the Christian church, and each individual Christian’s spiritual journey from sin to salvation. The biblical promises of restoration and renewal were construed to mean regeneration and to be transferred to Christians, the spiritual Israel, the *new* Chosen People. Moreover, as Sacvan Bercovitch explains, the Puritans read their exodus from England and their errand into the American wilderness as the historical fulfillment of the biblical type, giving the world a *new*, geographically specific Promised Land (*The American Jeremiad*, 75–80). At the same time, like other Protestant millennialists, the Puritans believed that the Jews still had a special role to play in history. Increase Mather explained the “Miraculous manner of GOD’s preserving the *Jewish Nation*” at Monis’ baptism: “it is an unprecedented and incomprehensible thing, that GOD should for *Two Thousand Years* preserve this People dispersed among other Nations,

without being confounded with them in their Religions and Customs, as is usual among all dispersed People; this clearly Demonstrates that GOD has preserved them for some great design, which what can it be but their Conversion?" (Colman, *Discourse*, ii–iii). They looked forward to the conversion of the Jews, their redemption from obstinacy and error, as a sign that the end of times was near. Monis' apostasy was an affirmation of the Puritans' place in sacred history.

For Rashi, the beginning authorizes the end, as Israel's *future* redemption is cast as a *return* to Zion, a renewal of the Past (Lamentations 5:21). By seeking to refute the "nine principal arguments the Modern Jewish Rabbins do make to prove the Messiah is yet to come" (Friedman, "Judah Monis," 3), Monis hoped to free the Future from the Past. For Monis, as for his Puritan sponsors, the end redeems the beginning; just as the Old Testament is seen to foreshadow, and thus be fulfilled by the New, so Monis' Jewish beginnings are given meaning by his Christian end. For this reason, Monis was never asked to renounce his Jewish origins. Indeed, his place in Puritan society was inextricably bound up with his identity as a Jew. His book bears the dedication, "To my Brothers *According to the Flesh*." He kept his Sabbath on Saturday. His tombstone bears the inscription: "Here lies buried Rabbi Judah Monis, M.A." (Kramer, "The Conversion of the Jews," 178–179). But the significance of his Jewish origins was wholly determined by the Puritan society in which he lived. The Puritans assimilated Monis into their New World eschatology; Monis assimilated the Puritan vision of history, refuted Rashi (as it were), and recreated himself as an *American* Jew. His two books may thus be construed as the Jewish literary fruit of his American experience, and Jewish American literary history may be thus said to originate in the conversion of Judah Monis.

Monis knew that his "Brethren *According to the Flesh*" would not approve of his conversion. "I do expect the News of my Embracing the Christian Religion [having] come to your Ears some time ago, has been somewhat surprizing to you all," he wrote in his dedication, "and I am afraid you did not think it to be the best you ever have heard" (Colman, *Discourse*, i [v]). In America, conversion never developed into what Michael Ragussis has called a "culture of conversion" – never became what it did, say, for Heinrich Heine, perhaps the most famous literary convert to Christianity in nineteenth-century Europe. Not because Jews were more pious in America (plainly they were not) but because America was too open – because, as Heine wrote of America: "Everyone over there can find salvation his own way" (Diner, *A Time for Gathering*, 37). Antisemitism remained, missionary societies plied their trade, and some Jews did convert, but by and large American Jews, even those with tenuous attachments to Judaism, found other

ways to negotiate the rhetorical terrain between themselves and America – particularly after the Revolution.

Consider the August 1790 address of Moses Seixas (1744–1809), warden of the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, to President George Washington. “Permit the children of the stock of Abraham,” Seixas begins, “to join with our fellow-citizens in welcoming you to New Port” (Schappes, *Documentary History of the Jews*, 79). In some ways, the address echoes the deferential addresses of contemporaneous Jewish leaders to European monarchs, but with at least one crucial difference. Seixas identifies the Jews in a twofold manner: on one hand, as “the stock of Abraham” and, on the other hand, as “fellow-citizens.” Before and elsewhere, these two terms were mutually exclusive. But Seixas offers both, with no overt attempt to mediate between the two, to convert one into the other. They were both: Jews by descent (to use Werner Sollors’ terminology) and Americans by consent. It was a revolutionary (if deferential) declaration, wholly appropriate to the Revolutionary occasion. “Deprived as we have hitherto been of the invaluable rights of free citizens,” he explains,

we now, with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of events, behold a government, erected by the majesty of the people, a government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance, but generously offering to all liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship, deeming every one, of whatever nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental machine. (Schappes, *Documentary History of the Jews*, 79)

Jews had a long history of petitioning for their rights in the New World, beginning as early as 1656, when a group of Jewish businessmen in New Netherlands protested Peter Stuyvesant’s withholding of their privileges to the Dutch West India Company. But this was different: Seixas’ address was not a petition at all. European Jewish leaders extolled their monarchs for their toleration of the Jews, their loyal subjects. But as Washington explains in his response to Seixas’s address: “It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights” (Schappes, *Documentary History of the Jews*, 80). When all men are created equal – when “the people” is defined politically, rather than ethnically or religiously – then the Jews are, by definition, “equal parts of the great governmental machine.”

The implications of this formulation are not only political but also rhetorical. By making Judaism a matter of conscience, immune to governmental interference, America offered the Jews not only equal rights but also a new, secular narrative, with a new beginning and a new, palpable end. *Hitherto*, the Jews had been persecuted; *now* they are part of the great governmental

machine. *Hitherto*, Jews had been tolerated, at best; *now* liberty is spoken of, not toleration. The history of exile and dispersion that Rashi's exegesis had looked beyond (and that Mather had rendered in providential terms) now takes on a prominence and a significance of its own, drawn from the self-evident truths of American history. Theoretically, this new story is wholly secular, a story of rights and liberties, not redemption or salvation: it does not in principle seek to replace the sacred history of the Jews. So argued, at least, the Reverend Gershom Mendes Seixas (Moses' brother and *Hazan* of the Spanish-Portuguese *Shearith Israel* synagogue in New York) in a discourse preached the previous November. Recalling the history of the Jews from God's promise to Abraham to the destruction of the Temple, he concludes:

From that period even until now, our predecessors have been, and we are still at this time in captivity among the different nations of the earth; and though we are . . . made equal partners of the benefits of government by the constitution of these states . . . still we cannot but view ourselves as captives in comparison to what we were formerly, and what we expect to be hereafter, when the outcasts of Israel shall be gathered together

and "we shall be established under our own king – the Messiah the son of David" (*A Religious Discourse*, 12, my italics).

Gershom Seixas' protestations only underscore the fact that, in the early years of the republic, the Jews were faced with two competing historical narratives, difficult to keep apart and difficult to reconcile. No doubt some in the Reverend Seixas' audience found his argument dissonant: it was surely easier for Rashi to see the promised land in the shadow of the Crusades than for American Jews to see captivity in the afterglow of the Revolution. One history was secular, the other sacred: but in the heady days of the New Republic, despite the separation of church and state, the line between the sacred and secular was increasingly blurred. America's secular achievements – the spread of democracy, economic progress, territorial expansion – took on sacred overtones and a civil religion emerged. The typological vision of the New England Puritans was being transformed and extended to all America and to all Americans. Eventually, the allure of the rhetoric would prove difficult for many Jews to resist. Indeed, for all his talk of "liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship," Moses Seixas cannot keep from addressing Washington in biblical terms. He remembers "with pleasure . . . when the God of Israel who delivered David from the peril of the sword shielded your head in the day of battle," and he prays that "the angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land may graciously conduct you through all the dangers and difficulties of this mortal life" (Schappes, *Documentary History of the Jews*, 79). But while such

language establishes common rhetorical ground between American Jewry and the American President, while it confers religious legitimacy upon current events, it does not challenge the validity of his brother's vision of history. In 1790, for the most part, the two narratives remained separate.

Much of the literature of American Jews may be said to have originated in the duality of Seixas' address to Washington. On one hand, it allowed Jews to be Jews, to express their ethnic difference, to retain (like Gershom Seixas) the moral imperative of "in the beginning"; on the other hand, it freed Jews to be Americans, to put aside their ethnic difference without having to renounce it, to tell the tale of hitherto/now with impunity. The separation of sacred and secular set the stage for Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851), diplomat, editor, politician, and one of the first two Jewish dramatists in America. (The other was Isaac Harby.) Noah was, in Seixas' terms, both a devoted child of the stock of Abraham and a patriotic citizen of the United States, the most prominent Jew in antebellum America, as well as the most flamboyant – and the most maligned. Frequently the target of antisemitic slurs, he was the self-appointed champion of Jewish causes. At the same time, Noah's "early hankering for the national drama" (Schuldiner and Kleinfeld, *Selected Writings*, 65) led to his joining the quest for American literary nationality. He wrote four full-length plays in that quest: *She Would Be a Soldier* (1819), *The Siege of Tripoli* (1820), *Marion, the Hero of Lake George* (1822), and *The Grecian Captive* (1822). None of these plays, nor much of his other writing (say, the journalism collected in *Essays of Howard*, 1820) have anything to do with Judaism. They belong to Jewish American literary history, not because their content is in any way recognizably Jewish, but simply by virtue of Seixas' twofold definition of the American Jew.

As one historian puts it succinctly, "Noah was a curious mix" (Hertzberg, *The Jews in America*, 93). Nowhere is the literary quality of that mix more evident (or more curious) than in his notorious Ararat address. In 1820, just as his career as an American dramatist was taking off, Noah petitioned the New York State assembly for permission to buy Grand Island in the Niagara River, near Buffalo, to build a colony for immigrant Jews – a preparatory stage to their restoration to Palestine. With a self-promoting nod to the biblical Noah, he called it Ararat. The plan was very much of its time and place: America had been trying to attract immigrants since colonial times, and there were other plans to attract Jews at that time, by Jews and non-Jews alike (Schappes, *Documentary History of the Jews*, 141–147). When Rebecca Gratz mentions these schemes (Noah's in particular) in a letter to a friend, she questions "whether they have taken the wisest plans," but does not doubt the immigrants "would be happier under such a government" (Schappes,

Documentary History of the Jews, 149). Noah's idea of restoration had fewer precedents, but in an era of proliferating religious revivals, millennialist sects, and social reform movements, the notion could hardly be called unusual. What is remarkable, however, is the peculiar interplay of narrative elements in his address.

On Thursday, September 15, 1825, Noah organized an elaborate, theatrical procession of musicians, soldiers, politicians, clergymen, masons, and Noah himself, dressed as the "Judge of Israel" in "robes of crimson silk, trimmed with ermine and a richly embossed golden medal suspended from the neck" (Schuldiner and Kleinfeld, *Selected Writings*, 106). The band played a march from Handel's *Judas Maccabeus* as the procession entered a church near Grand Island. After a prayer service, Noah delivered his address, to which, the *Buffalo Patriot* reported, "a crowded auditory listened with profound attention" (Schuldiner and Kleinfeld, *Selected Writings*, 107). What they heard was a melange of distinct, even opposed, but mutually sustaining rhetorics, of the rising glory of America and "Renew our days as of old." Like Gershom Seixas, Noah's account of Jewish history was essentially that of Rashi – a vision that looks to the future by gazing longingly backwards. The Jews "have long been captives in a land of strangers," he asserted, but they "never should and never will relinquish the just hope of regaining possession of their ancient heritage" (114, 112). "Two thousand years have nearly elapsed since the dissolution of the Jewish government" and they are "scattered over the face of the globe," but they "have been destined by Providence to remain a distinct people," to "retain their homogenousness of character – the peculiarity of their tenets, the identity of their faith" (112). Indeed, Noah declares, "no part of our religion . . . should be altered, nothing should be taken from the law" (123). And indeed, Jews have "carefully preserved the oracles of God assigned to their safe keeping." *Remain, retain, and ultimately regain.* For Jews, the American asylum is "temporary and provisionary" (112). To them, America may be the "happy land" but it is not the "promised land" (124), and they look forward to the fulfillment of the biblical prophecies.

One thing that distinguishes Noah's vision from that of Seixas is that, for Noah, America has a decided role to play in the providential history of the Jews. Noah's sense that America was not just another place of exile emerges most fancifully in speculations that the American Indians – who are "a brave and eloquent people, with an Asiatic complexion, and Jewish features," who "are divided into tribes," and whose "language and dialect are evidently of Hebrew origin" – are descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel (122). "If the tribes could be brought together, could be made sensible of their *origins*, could be civilized. And restored to their long lost brethren,"

he exclaims, “how clearly have the prophecies been fulfilled . . . how providential our deliverance” (123, my italics). Noah was so taken with the idea that two years after the spectacle at Grand Island, he published an extended *Discourse on the Evidences of the American Indians Being the Descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel*. But Noah has another story to tell as well, a secular tale of progress and enlightenment, and this story sets him apart from Reverend Seixas even more. Noah calls his address a “declaration of independence,” and his opening paragraph clearly and deliberately echoes Jeffersonian rhetoric. America’s role in the restoration of the Jews to their former glory has precisely to do with its role in secular history, in the rise and spread of liberalism. While the Jews still patiently endure, “the march of learning and science has been rapid and successful,” Noah notes, “and mankind are better qualified to estimate the blessings of toleration and liberal views . . . than at any former time” (112). Because America is the place where these blessings are most perfectly enjoyed, because it has itself effected these changes, he argues, the Jews ought to come to America. For all their constancy, bravery, and endurance, it seems, the Jews are still in need of regeneration – exile and oppression have taken their toll – and America is the only place for that regeneration to take place. For the Jews successfully to return whence they came, America had gloriously to rise.

Noah’s Ararat address originates in the interplay of two disparate historical discourses, one liberal and progressive, the other sacred and retrospective. The two discourses are divergent but mutually sustaining: the rising glory of America prepares the way for the restoration of the Jews; and the restoration of the Jews justifies the rising glory of America. Significantly, the balance gives way at certain points in the address, where liberalism seems to dictate the character of Jewish tradition. While Seixas looks forward to the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, Noah “deem[s] it expedient to reorganize the nation under the direction of the judges,” as the office “was not hereditary, conforms in some respect to that of chief Magistrate, and is in accordance with the genius and disposition of the people of this country” (113). By and large, however, each discourse retains its narrative and ideological integrity, each its own beginning and end. And while Ararat was a political failure – no Jew ever immigrated to Noah’s “city of refuge” (111), and its cornerstone, now in a museum in Buffalo, is all that remains of one of the most unusual incidents in Jewish American history – Noah’s rhetorical symbiosis nevertheless constitutes a notable Jewish American literary achievement.

Noah would return to the theme of Restoration later in his career: in 1845 he published a *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews*, and in 1849, an *Address . . . to Aid in the Erection of the Temple at Jerusalem*. By then,

however, the German wave of immigration had begun to make its mark on Jewish society and culture in America. The writers of that wave, particularly those associated with the movement for religious Reform, would significantly alter the way Jews in America understood the relationship between the two discourses. What was expedient for Noah – the attempt to make potentially objectionable points of Jewish law compatible with American values – becomes central to their thinking and would find its full expression in the decades to come in what Jonathan Sarna has called, “The Cult of Synthesis.” Susanna Heschel will explain the theological and political implications of their thought in the next chapter. My concerns here are literary.

When Isaac Mayer Wise arrived in New York from Bohemia in 1846, he was appalled by the lack of culture, particularly among Jews. He did note that “among the Portuguese Jews there was Mordecai Noah, who had achieved prominence, through his literary and political activity.” Otherwise, however, “nothing worthy of note had been accomplished in this quarter.” In regard to Jewish learning, the situation was even worse. “There was not one leader who could read unpunctuated Hebrew,” he recalled, “or . . . had the least knowledge of Judaism, its history, and literature.” In general, “ignorance swayed the scepter, and darkness ruled” (*Reminiscences*, 23–24). Moreover, he found German Jews not only culturally impoverished, but embarrassed of their Jewishness. In a critique similar to W. E. B. Du Bois’s analysis of the debilitating effects of “double-consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Wise judged that antisemitism “had demoralized the German and Polish Jew, and robbed him of his self-respect.” “He parodies and imitates, because he has lost himself,” he wrote, “and lacks the consciousness of manhood in himself” (*Reminiscences*, 330–331). The solution seemed clear to him. Unlike Du Bois, who called upon Blacks to acknowledge and cultivate their Africanness, Wise proposed a two-pronged approach. First, he took it upon himself to “popularize by spoken and written words as much Jewish learning as I might possess, in order to inculcate in others respect for Jewish literature” (332). But, “in order to gain the proud self-consciousness of the free-born man,” he also insisted that “the Jew must become an American.” By this he meant not only that the Jew must become part of the great governmental machine, as Moses Seixas suggested, but that they “become American through and through” (331).

Wise approached his self-appointed mission with passion and commitment, writing prolifically: history, theology, journalism, homily, polemic, apologetics, liturgy, fiction. (Wise published most of his fiction under the pen name of “The American Jewish Novelist,” making him first in that distinguished line.) For all his concern about Jewish literacy, however, Wise did not link himself to Rashi’s exegetical chain. To the contrary, like Judah

Monis, Wise utilized his learning to break the chain and, assimilating the dominant discourse of his time and place, to forge a new relationship between Jewish past and present, fashioning himself as an *American Jew*. With the *Wissenschaft* scholars he read and admired, Wise took ethnic pride in and strength from the literary accomplishments of Jews, both ancient and modern, but refused to accept their religious authority over him. Hence the editorial audacity of *Minhag America* (1857), the revised prayerbook “suitable for America” whose publication Wise spearheaded. “We had to sacrifice everything related to throne, crown, and dynasty to the land of freedom,” he explained, and “everything cabbalistic and everything dealing with the sacrificial cult, the messiah, the return to Palestine . . . as well as the laments about persecutions, were simply eliminated and were replaced by modern concepts” (“The World of My Books,” 129).

Simply eliminated. This verbal wave of the hand belies the extraordinary imaginative daring that propelled his entire literary career. That daring can be seen already in Wise’s first major work, the ambitious and controversial *History of the Israelitish Nation . . . Derived from the Original Sources* (1854). To derive Jewish history “from the original sources” meant that he was summarily doing away with Rashi, Rabbi Isaac, and the ideology of return, treating the Bible as a source (one among many), and reading it from “the democratic point of view” (“The World of My Books,” 122), thus reworking the story of Jewish national origins in the image of the American present. The Israelite exodus from Egypt, he wrote, “is the first time in history, that a nation claimed and attained its rights; the first time that a despot was chastised by an offended and oppressed people” (*History*, 66). A similar strategy emerges in his fiction. In *The First of the Maccabees* (1860), an historical romance of the Hasmonean revolt in the second century BCE, Wise has Matathia, father of Judah Maccabee, utter these sentiments: “The despotic will of Antiochus will shatter into atoms on the rock of Israel’s fortitude. The blood of our saints impregnates the tree of liberty with new strength . . . I say, woe unto him who submits to the unjust mandates of a foreign despot, renounces his inalienable rights, and forgets his duties” (7, 10). To be sure, Wise meant not only to redefine Judaism but also to redefine America. Viewing the Jewish past through the eyes of the American present, he went on to claim that the American present found its origins in the Jewish past – looking forward to such works as Oscar Straus’ *The Origin of Republican Form of Government* (1885). As he put it: “Moses formed one pole and the American revolution the other, of an axis around which revolved the political history of thirty-three centuries” (*History*, iv). Putting the words of the American founding fathers in the mouths of Jewish historical figures, Wise breaks down the barrier that separated Jewish from American narratives

in the writings of the Seixases and Mordecai Noah. American history and Jewish history coalesce, and the history of the Jews becomes “a useful and welcome contribution to *American* literature” (ix, my italics).

Wise’s mission to create and disseminate Jewish American literature centered much of the time on *The Israelite*, the newspaper he founded in Cincinnati in 1854. He had little problem acquiring news, sermons, and history – even if he had to write much himself. But he promised his readers poems and stories, and these (he later protested) he was more reluctant to write himself. Still, he did produce anonymously at least a dozen fictions in English and German that were published serially in the paper and its German supplement, *Die Deborah*, along with many unsigned poems. He felt he had little choice. Eventually H. H. Moos and Nathan Mayer “relieved” him of the task of novel-writing. But the only Jewish poet in America he seems to have thought of was Penina Moise (1797–1880), and, Wise writes, she was “already very much on the decline” (“The World of My Books,” 126–127). There were a few others: Rebecca Hyneman (1812–1875) and Octavia Harby Moses (1823–1904). The not-yet-controversial Adah Isaacs Menken (1835–1868) contributed regularly between 1857 and 1859. But plainly, the tradition of Jewish American poetry that Maeera Shreiber describes in chapter 9 was still in its swaddling clothes.

Emma Lazarus (1849–1887) was only five years old when *The Israelite* began appearing. Of Sephardic–German descent, her family had been in America since colonial times. Her maternal great-grandfather actively supported the Revolution, and her cousin, Benjamin Cardozo, became a justice of the Supreme Court. Her father, a wealthy sugar merchant, brought his children up in the upper-class, cultured circles in New York and Newport. She was taught French, German, and Italian, and her first book of poetry, *Poems and Translations: Written Between the Age of Fourteen and Sixteen*, published privately by her father in 1866, including renderings of Hugo, Dumas, Schiller, and Heine. The volume drew a kind response from Ralph Waldo Emerson, and her second volume, *Admetus and Other Poems* (1871), was dedicated to him. Her next volume, *Alide*, a novel about Goethe, appeared in 1874 and was praised by Ivan Turgenev. Emerson read her verse drama, *The Spagnoletto* (1876), in manuscript and told her – he had become a mentor by then – that he could not put it down. She was far and away the most successful Jewish writer in America since Mordecai Noah and was personally affronted when Emerson did *not* include one of her poems in his anthology, *Parnassus*. Clearly she did not think of herself as a Jewish but as an American writer – which, indeed, she was. The closing lines of her Statue of Liberty sonnet, “The New Colossus,” are among the most well-known lines of poetry ever written in America: “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your

huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,/I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (*The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, 1, 203). We might say that the symbolic power of the sonnet is rooted in large part in Lazarus' ability to articulate American cultural myth: America assimilated the poem, in other words, because the poem so thoroughly assimilates America.

Lazarus published poetry and prose in the most prestigious journals of the her day, in *Lippincott's*, *Scribner's*, and *Century*, and had no particular need to publish in the Jewish press. Eventually she would choose to. The turning point in her career came around 1880, when news of the East European pogroms reached America, along with the first Russian immigrants, and she took on the twin causes of the immigration (though she had very little in common culturally with the immigrants themselves) and, more controversially, the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. She began to write about Jewish subjects, unapologetically, fiercely, both in secular journals and in the Jewish press. Her *Songs of a Semite* was published in book form by *The American Hebrew* in 1882; the series of proto-Zionist essays she called *An Epistle to the Hebrews* appeared that same year. She began to think of herself as a Jewish poet though what this meant to her is not always clear. Or rather, it seems to have meant several different things. On one hand, like Wise, she valorizes and champions "a thorough interpenetration with [Judaism's] historic memories and poetic traditions" (*An Epistle to the Hebrews*, 13) and, on the other hand, insists that true Judaism is "not the teaching of the *Thora*, not the inculcation of the Talmud, not the preservation of the Hebrew tongue, not the maintenance of Synagogue worship" but a "spiritualized form of our belief" (25), which could be distilled from, but not dependent upon, those traditions. Then again, she also adopts the terms of romantic racialism and talks freely about the "Hebrew genius" and "the fire of our Oriental blood" (29, 20), as if being Jewish were fundamentally and necessarily only a matter of descent.

Lazarus' confused or eclectic sense of the origins of her Jewish art may be explained by the fact that hers was a thoroughly modern American Judaism, emphatically self-conscious, culled and constructed from a variety of sources. She did not have to break Rashi's exegetical chain because, for her, it was already broken – both as a matter of personal indifference and, later, as the Judaism she professed was, at bottom, the Reform Judaism of Wise and others. The "historic memories and poetic traditions" that she celebrates and masters became hers only after, and to the extent that, she decided to embrace them. She learned her Jewish history from both Jewish historians such as Heinrich Graetz and Christians such as British historian Henry

Hart Milman. She had a special relation to the Golden Age in medieval Spain and the Enlightenment in Germany – no doubt in part because of her Sephardic–German descent, but also because those were periods when secular, along with Jewish learning, flourished among the Jews. Her favorite modern Jewish poet was Heinrich Heine, the ambivalent apostate, whose poems she translated (her *Poems and Ballads of Heinrich Heine* appeared in 1881) and who represented, in her words, both “vanished Hellas and Hebraic pain” (*The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, I, 203). Her sense of the Jewish mission to the world draws heavily upon the rhetoric of Reform thinkers and preachers, but she utterly and vehemently refused to discard Jewish nationalism. Her Jewish nationalism was derived and authorized in large part neither from Rashi (about whom she wrote two poems) nor even from Rabbi Judah Halevi, whose poetry she translated (first from German translations, then, haltingly from a late-learned Hebrew), but from the early secular Zionist Leo Pinsker, whose *Autoemancipation* she read and admired, and, even more centrally, from Christian writers such as Laurence Oliphant and, most importantly, George Eliot: in the dedication to her verse tragedy *A Dance to Death*, Lazarus wrote that Eliot “did most among the artists of our day towards elevating and ennobling the spirit of Jewish nationality” (*The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, II, 69). And her commitment to the immigrants owes as much to the American rhetoric of asylum in Tom Paine’s *Common Sense* and St. John de Crevecoeur’s *Letters From an American Farmer* or even, in a more oblique sense, in Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* as to the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Lazarus’ version of American origins reflects her complex and contradictory Jewish origins. Consider her sonnet, “1492”:

Thou two-faced year, Mother of Change and Fate,
Didst weep when Spain cast forth with flaming sword,
The children of the prophets of the Lord,
Prince, priest, and people, spurned by zealot hate.
Hounded from sea to sea, from state to state,
The West refused them, and the East abhorred.
No anchorage the known world could afford,
Close-locked was every port, barred every gate.
Then smiling, thou unveil’dst, O two-faced year,
A virgin world where doors of sunset part,
Saying, “Ho, all who weary enter here!
There falls each ancient barrier that the art
Of race or creed or rank devised, to rear
Grim bulwarked hatred between heart and heart!”

(*The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, II, 22)

Lazarus' subject is the coincidence of two historical events – the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the discovery of America – and her strategy, the juxtaposition of two disparate historical discourses: the history of the Jews as perennial exiles and the history of America as immigrant asylum. The juxtaposition is given significance through the curious Janus-faced figure of the “two-faced year” that, through a sequence of gestures (weeping, smiling, unveiling), defines historical process as a fated movement from East to West, from old to new, from exile to redemption. On one hand, like Wise, Lazarus reconfigures American mythology as an expression of the Jewish spirit: the story of American origins begins with the Jews and ends with words that echo the prophet Isaiah, “Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.” “In that day shall this song be sung in Judah: We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.” “Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in” (55:1, 25:12, 26:1–2). On the other hand, Lazarus' vision here is essentially Miltonic, as Spanish paradise lost looks forward to the “virgin [American] world” of paradise regained. Just as Milton's “flaming sword” of Genesis 3:24 and *Paradise Lost* Book XII signals Adam's learning “that suffering for Truth's sake/Is fortitude to highest victorie” (lines 569–570), so Lazarus' “flaming sword” signals, if only implicitly here, the Jews' acceptance of their fate. Or, as Lazarus wrote in 1882 of the Russian pogroms, “once more we prove/How strength of supreme suffering still is ours/For Truth and Law and Love” (*The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, II, 3) – and for America. Even the expulsion from Spain has its place in God's design; it, too, is a fortunate fall. A Christian lesson, to be sure, but that is precisely Lazarus' point. For if there is any truth to Christianity, she often argued, it is the Jews who embody it best.

Lazarus' poetry marks a clear turning point in Jewish American literature, as it gazes at the new East European immigrants – the “wretched refuse” of Europe's “teeming shores”; the “ignoble relic” (*The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, II, 14) of Israel's glorious past – through the eyes of the Sephardic–German experience of America. The new immigrants themselves gazed at America with different eyes. Many could see American myth *as* myth: from their ghetto tenements, they looked skeptically at “all the whimsical metamorphoses wrought upon the children of Israel of the great modern exodus by the vicissitudes of life in this their Promised Land of today” (Cahan, *Yekl*, 14). Immigrant preachers, linked in an unbroken chain to Rashi and Rabbi Isaac, insisted on eternal truths, truths sadly too familiar to them. Glossing Genesis 12:1 (“And the Lord said unto Abram: ‘Get thee out of thy country . . .’”), Rabbi Judah Leib Lazerow commented that “in each and every generation and in each and every place they will teach [Abram's seed] this portion of ‘Get thee out’ – Get thee out, people of Israel, for this

is not your place! And the portion of ‘Get thee out’ that began in the days of Abram has not yet ended.” Still, they knew that America was not another Russia, and as they looked back, they also cautiously looked forward. “Thank God that in this country of ours, the land of freedom and liberty, the land of America, they have not *yet* begun to teach us the portion of ‘Get thee out,’” Lazerow continued. “And *we hope* that they will never teach us this portion to the end of time” (*The Staff of Judah*, 493, my italics).

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