

States of the Union

GROWING UP JEWISH IN AMERICA

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

FOR REASONS I do not entirely understand, I began work a few months ago on a set of poems about growing up Jewish, drawing on what I could remember of my adolescent days 40 years ago in Saint Paul, Minnesota. It is possible that for today's teenagers my recollections will seem out-of-date—but I don't really believe that. The Jewish adolescent's basic problem of living with a dual identity probably looms as large as ever. If anti-Semitism today is not so virulent as it was in my youth, it seems no less pervasive. As always, it comes with the territory.

Anyone who has confronted the dilemmas of dual identity will understand the hazards of pluralism as experienced from deep within the American Melting Pot. Social lines, to be sure, can be crossed, but not without social consequences, and not without a certain degree of anxiety over the risks entailed. What strikes me as strange is that few people nowadays talk about these matters, perhaps because the new mode of ethnic assertiveness shuts our mouths. (And those who do talk about them often write whole books to persuade us there is no longer much that needs to be said.) In a climate that emphasizes pride

over pain, complaints can seem uncomfortably disloyal.

My own adolescence happened to exaggerate the usual dichotomies. As the son of a rabbi (Reform) I had plenty of opportunities to be Jewish, as often as not in a public manner. Within the family our Jewish identity could assume an oddly clandestine quality. At the dinner table we would sometimes converse in a code-language my grandmother had invented to keep our maid (always a ruddy-faced Lutheran fresh off the farm) in the dark about our "clannish" concerns. Our cipher for "Jew" was *u.l.*, an abbreviation of the German *Unsere Leute*, or "our people." Apparently we thought such devices could preserve our Jewish world, could keep it inviolate. I did not think any of this peculiar; the sweet intimacy of it all appealed to me.

Every weekday, however, I inhabited a very different sort of world: I attended a country day school where gentility and gentleness reigned supreme. We began each morning with the Lord's Prayer and a rousing Christian hymn, pagan rituals that I grudgingly enjoyed. But I wished my fellow students would forgive me my trespasses, all of which seemed mysteriously related to my being Jew-

ish. The anti-Semitism I encountered back then was hard to reconcile with the war our country was waging against the world's master bigot. To this day I remain perplexed.

What follow are poems that recall some of my inept, on-the-spot attempts to solve the riddle of growing up Jewish in America.

How to Get Through the Memorial Service

If restless, let little words
come to your aid:
drop an "e" into "fast"
and enjoy the sudden feast.
Double the "o" in God.
That's good.
Count the burnt-out bulbs
drooping from the high ceiling.
Each dark bulb is a teardrop
among the living lights.

If restless still,
peek at your mother.
See the teardrops wet her cheek
like melted snow.
Someone she softly misses:
her big sister, your aunt,
who cried these very prayers
last Yom Kippur.
Now touch your mother's hand.
Let her feel your light.

Gram and the Human Race

Gram is on the couch crocheting
and I am on the floor
reading the front page out loud:
"104 Lost in Crash over Buffalo."

"God forbid!" she says.
"Were any of them ours?"

The old question does not please me.
I say, "They are all ours,"
pushing each word along
like some wonderfully heavy treasure.

The metal hooks work in and out:
click click click click click click.
"But some," she says at last,
"may be more ours than others."
Now what's *that* supposed to mean?
Struck dumb, I turn to the comics.

Bible Studies

This glossy text is full of -ites:
Hittites, Moabites, Gideonites,
to name a few whose ethnic lights

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were doused by history.
My own robed tribe, the Israelites,
have known the sting of desert nights
since breath of history.
(They're pictured here scaling craggy heights.)

Who are these doe-eyed strangers
bestriding the pink hills of my
daydreams?

How came they to beget me?
Where does that get me?
Why, after this has been lost
and that has been won,
do I emerge their son?
It's a mystery.

Supermarket Sabbath

You must remember to remember.
But Saturday's child has to work,
and here you are,
chasing carts under the sun
for a market that won't quit,
not for you today,
not for them tomorrow.

Spin those wheels. Bang those carts.
Let the work roll on:
while the sun dances,
the metal burns,
the market music fills your head.

Now do you remember?
There is a quiet place,
a corner in your mind, candle-lit.
All week it was locked tight
like ghetto gates at sundown.
This day it beckons.
You can glimpse the ancient light
inside,
settling and settling.

There, beyond all weather,
you may go and refresh yourself.
You would be foolish to forget.

Love Story

Her nose is freckled
Her hair is yellow
Her name is Pattie.
We hold each other lightly
as we wiggle to the beat.
"If there's one thing that scares me,"
she shouts, "it's rabbis."
The music stops.
"That's a terrible thing to say."
"You think so? Well, you'd be scared
too if some big fuming-at-the-mouth
dog came along and bit you."

The smiling music begins anew.
In gratitude I fall in love
with this golden-haired Christian
who mispronounces everything.

Thoughts While Sitting

Upon an Anti-Semite's Knee

"Why you old sheeny you!" he
whispers,
while I, a Jewish burden,
sit dumbly on his knee.

That winter morning,
the new snow so white it hurt,
a shouting Chevy swooped down
and sucked us younger boys inside.
"Not him," I heard. "No room."
But being well loved elsewhere,
I could not name rejection here.

In the crowded, sudden heat
I find what space I can,
any reef, any senior's knee. "Why
you old sheeny you!" —
telling me an ancient story
I do not wish to hear. Nothing
personal: only stick-words
they mass-produce so casually
in forever-fluorescent factories,
tinder-terms that have fueled furnaces
since Shadrach went where he wasn't
wanted.

Why is this happening?
How did I get here?
In a mile or two it will be over
and a simpler sort of schooling
will recommence. Ever so slightly
I shift my weight, hoping
not to arouse history's knee jerk.
I stare straight ahead,
counting the lampposts to
deliverance.

New Year, Amen

(Rosh Hashonah Eve)
Stale moon, climb down.
Clear the sky.
Get out of town.
Goodbye.

Fresh moon, arise.
Throw me a glow.
Shine a surprise.
Hello.

New Year, amen.
Now we begin:
Beam me a new me.