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“Strange times to be a Jew”:

An Analysis of Jewish Identity in Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*

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O. Introduction

Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* depicts a rather alternative version of history. Based on a forgotten proposal of Harold Ickes in 1940, the author has many European Jews who risked death by the Nazi regime relocated to the fictional Alaskan District of Sitka. As a result, the Holocaust did not have such a dramatic impact as it did in reality. Instead, the Sitka Jews are confronted with the prospect of Reversion, the day when control over the community will be transferred back to the United States and they will lose yet another home.

This liberal adaptation of the historical reality, however, generated a lot of rather negative reviews. John Podhoretz, for instance, stated that the novel represents a radical anti-Zionism and an utter disdain for the state of Israel, which as a result of the relocation was wiped off the map in this alternative history (Kravitz 96). New York Post reviewer Kyle Smith called the novel anti-Semitic because of its caricatural portrayal of Jewish American lives and D.G. Myers criticized Chabon's faulty use of the Yiddish language (Scanlan 506).

In this bachelor paper I will try to respond to these accusations by analyzing the Jewish identity as it is portrayed in the text. In the first chapter I will discern the central feeling of dislocation that lies at the base of this concept and briefly refer to the two possible reactions to this sentiment. The next two chapters then serve to elaborate on this preliminary analysis, portraying first how this sense of loss is enforced in the novel and then offer a more thorough dissection of the two responses as they are represented by the characters in the novel. In the fourth and final chapter I will ultimately discern the ideological position of the novel, proving that it shows a more nuanced view towards Jewish identity than these reviews suggest, and compare it to that of the author.

1. The Perception of Jewish Identity

As Howard Wettstein states in his introduction to Diasporas and Exiles (2), the concept of Jewish identity is a rather controversial one. It has generated a multiplicity of different definitions over time and has been researched in various academic disciplines, from purely literary approaches to more social and cultural perspectives. But in spite of the many studies, the notion seems to be impervious to one clear analysis. There is however one characteristic on which most researchers agree, the importance of the feeling of dislocation and loss:

> Taking a bit of dramatic license, one might say that the religion as bequeathed to us both by the rabbis of the Talmud and by subsequent developments – another fifteen hundred years of intermittent persecution, expulsion, and, in our times, shoah – is nothing less than a religion of galut. (Wettstein, "Coming to terms with exile" 49)

The word galut, which literally means "exposed" (Shreiber 276), is derived from the Hebrew verb galeh, which first occurs in the story of Noah's Ark. It is used to describe his nakedness and refers to a sense of "sexual vulnerability and social transgression" (Shreiber 276). In its religious context it evokes images of estrangement and wandering without a home, not only in a literal way, but also in relation to God. It insinuates a removal from the divine principle of meaning (Shreiber 276). In a more contemporary context it is usually translated with the terms exile or diaspora. These different translations do however indicate certain different views of Jewishness.

Exile is often used to indicate a state in which the victims consider their identity as unattainable away from their homeland. The only way to redeem themselves and achieve their destiny is to return to Judaea (Gruen 20). This feeling closely resembles the atmosphere on Verbover Island in the novel, where rabbi Shpilman concocts a plan to bomb the Dome of the Rock and initiate the fight for Jerusalem. But it is perhaps even more apparent in the

description of the homesick dentist Buchbinder, who literally tries to collect as many of the old relics as he can:

> But then, as happens sometimes to dentists, Buchbinder got a little carried away. The deepest, oldest madness of the Jews took hold of him. He started to turn out re-creations of the cutlery and getups employed by the ancient Koyenim, the high priests of Yahweh. To scale at first but soon full-size. Blood buckets, gobbet forks, ash shovels, all of it as required by Leviticus for the old holy barbecues in Jeruzalem. (TYPU 148[1])

The term diaspora on the other hand, offers a more nuanced and positive image of the loss of the homeland. It shows a shift of attention of Jews towards more "local and regional loyalties" (Gruen 20) and a cultivation of attachment to the place where they now live instead (Gruen 18). An attitude that is represented in the novel by Hertz Shemets, who fought most of his life to give the community a permanent status. Diaspora suggests that Jews "do not require a territorial sanctuary or legitimation," (Gruen 18) but rather that they carry their spiritual center with them, wherever they go (Gruen 18). Or as Chabon refers to it in a more secular way:

> Jews who carry their homes in an old cowhide bag, on the back of a camel, in the bubble of air at the center of their brains. Jews who land on their feet, hit the ground running, ride out the vicissitudes, and make the best of what falls to hand, from Egypt to Babylon, from Minsk Gubernya to the District of Sitka. (155)

Both ways of dealing with the ever-present feeling of dislocation are thus portrayed in the novel and appear to form an explanation for many of the character's' actions. They are

[1] Chabon, Michael. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. London: Harper Perennial, 2008. Print.

moreover reinforced by the central fear of Reversion, the day when control over the community will be transferred back to the US. It seems therefore justifiable to limit my analysis of Jewish identity to the sentiment of loss, thereby focusing on how Chabon enforces this notion and taking a closer look at the responses of the various individuals.

2. The Sentiment of Loss

2.1. The Holocaust Imagery

Perhaps the most pertinent way in which the author consolidates this atmosphere of loss and impending doom, is by letting the reality of the Holocaust seep through the cracks of his alternative history. As stated in the introduction, the Holocaust or Shoah, does not play a direct role in the story. By turning to the genre of crime fiction, however, it could be argued that Chabon indirectly ties his novel to the rich tradition of Holocaust narratives, in particular those written by the third generation:

> Each of these novels is structured around a central act of problem solving which can be likened to that undertaken by the detective within a crime narrative. In the texts the protagonists are searching for knowledge about his or her past which has been lost as a result of the Holocaust: the central question, 'whodunnit?' is replaced by the introspective 'who am I? (Richardson 161)

In both genres that central question is often left unanswered. The hard-boiled detective story usually provides the reader with an answer, but the situation is never completely resolved. In this case the murderer of Mendel Shpilman is unmasked, but the protagonist is still unable to prevent the larger scheme of the Verbovers. The last sentence of the novel – "'Brennan,' Landsman says. 'I have a story for you." (TYPU 411) – does suggest that the whole truth will

be revealed, but that does not happen within the boundaries of the text. The same statement can be made about the Holocaust narrative, which often leaves the broader questions surrounding engagement with the Holocaust unanswered (Richardson 169). The reader is left with the task of filling in the gaps, much like the third generation must appeal to its imagination to reconstruct the lost family history (Codde 8).

In developing his tale, Chabon furthermore relies on many clichés of crime fiction: the sharp contrast between the protagonist and his stable and always reliable partner Berko Shemets, the introduction of Bina as the strong woman who holds a certain power over the detective, and the rather grim setting of the story in a broken-down and partly deserted city all respond to the well-known conventions of a noir film. Even Landsman himself can be seen as a collection of generic rules:

> Look at Landsman, one shirt-tail hanging out, snow-dusted pork pie knocked to the left, coat hooked to a thumb over his shoulder. Hanging on to a sky-blue cafeteria ticket as if it's the strap keeping him on his feet. His cheek needs the razor. His back is killing him. For reasons he doesn't understand – or maybe for no reason – he hasn't had a drink of alcohol since nine-thirty in the morning. (TYPU 146)

By appealing to the reader's pre-existing knowledge of these conventions, he gives them the opportunity to shift their attention towards the series of Holocaust images that appear as the murder plot unravels. In the basement of the hotel Zamenhof, for instance, the sleuth discovers unmatched shoes, prayer shawls and a glass eye; a peculiar series of items that resembles the large number of personal possessions found in warehouses in Auschwitz. Other examples include the description of the Verbover Jews forming a train of grief at the funeral and the comparison of the art in Landsman's childhood home with barbed wire (Richardson 166-167).

These iconic Shoah symbols contribute to the sense of doom caused by the impending Reversion, they echo a feeling of loss related to the full horrific reality of the Holocaust. The "black pall of the Destruction" (TYPU 32) thus lingers over the Alaskan district and plays a cardinal role in the detective story (Franklin 240). This centrality is perhaps even best symbolized by the location of Landsman's family house on "Adler Street" (TYPU 41), an allusion to the fictional Holocaust survivor Joseph Adler who Chabon introduced in his non-fictional essay "Golems I Have Known" and who constitutes a defining figure in the author's own literary approach towards the Shoah (Franklin 241).

2.2. The Imaginary District

Another source of tension that pervades the novel is the continual emphasis on the imaginary status of the Yiddish community. The narration is "permeated by a sense of unease and foreboding and by the very impossibility of its own existence" (Richardson 166). From time to time the attention is diverted towards the fact that none of the inhabitants should be alive and that somehow things are not how they are supposed to be. The omniscient narrator for example "takes great care to reiterate the unlikelihood of his characters' existence throughout the narrative" (Richardson 166):

> Landsman recognizes the expression on Dick's face. It's the expression that goes with the feeling Landsman gets when he looks at his Chevelle Super Sport, or at the face of Bina Gelbfish. The face of a man who feels he was born into the wrong world. A mistake has been made; he is not where he belongs. (TYPU 282)

Apart from these explicit utterances, the text also contains many implicit signs that highlight this improbability. The description of the moon as a "high-resolution black-and-white photograph" (TYPU 338), the comparison of a group of radical Jews to "an alphabet of men scattered on a green page" (TYPU 247) and the reference to the lover of the Filipino donut

king Benito as a lady who "has been in and out of the hospital lately, dying in chapters, with a cliff-hanger at the end of every one" (TYPU 174) for instance all accentuate the fictional character of the district and its citizens.

This condition is moreover enforced by the frequent occurrences of stories during the murder investigation. Storytelling seems to form an important part of the lives of several characters. The live of Mendel Shpilman is characterized as "Nothing but stories until he was twenty years old" (TYPU 119) and tales of his miracles occur at several occasions. Of Bina Gelbfish it is said that "She does not solve cases as much as tells stories of them" (TYPU 158), shaping them with "confidence into narratives that hold together and make sense" (TYPU 158). And in the conversation between Cashdollar and Landsman the former almost completely integrates the past events into the textual world:

> "This man, my predecessor. He used to say, 'We are telling a story, Cashdollar. That's what we do.'" The voice he adopts to quote his former superior is bigger and not as folksy as his own prim tenor twang. More pompous. "' Tell them a story, Cashdollar. That's all the poor suckers want.' Only he didn't say 'suckers.'" […] He gives his head a gentle shake. "But we aren't telling a story." "No?" "Huh-uh. The story, Detective Landsman, is telling us. Just like it has done from the beginning. We're part of the story. You. Me." (TYPU 364-365)

This perpetual stress ties in with the overarching sense of downfall in two rather different ways. On the one hand, it suggests that the Sitka Jews are in fact already lost – "that all along, just under their boots, lay the abyss" (TYPU 96) – regardless of the actions of the protagonist or the resolution of the mystery. On the other hand it resonates the absence of such a Yiddish homeland in reality. In that respect the novel seems to reflect the somewhat wistful

conceptions of the author himself in response to finding a travel book "called *Say It in Yiddish*, edited by Beatrice and Uriel Weinreich" (Chabon, "Maps" 163):

> It is not the apparent "deadness" of its language, however accurate or inaccurate such an impression may be, that makes *Say It in Yiddish* such a wondrous, provocative, sad and funny book. Even if Yiddish is taken to be alive and well, *Say It in Yiddish* still proposes a world that never was and might have been, and makes it all feel absurdly and beautifully ordinary. (Chabon, "Maps" 172)

The narration consequently represents an exercise in imagining a *Yiddishland* (Myers 586), "a place where you could have rented a summer home from Yiddish speakers, gone to a Yiddish movie […] and then had your dental bridge repaired by a Yiddish-speaking dentist" (Chabon, "Maps" 165), but at the same time it underlines the impossibility of that world. This notion is likewise mirrored in the inadequate usage of the language, which is characterized by several Yiddishisms. Notable examples include the anglicized plural *yids* instead of the correct *yidn* and the use of *sholem* (peace) for gun, referring to the slang word *piece* that is often used in English crime fiction, but is not a homonymic parallel that exists in Yiddish (Myers 586).

2.3. The Sitka Ghosts

The sentiment of loss is, finally, also reinforced by the series of dead bodies that turn up during the progression of the story. This is evidently a murder narrative, but remarkably suicide seems to play a much bigger role than actual manslaughter: the original homicide is ultimately suggested to be a suicide, the text contains various descriptions of possible methods, Hertz Shemets tries but fails to kill himself and the protagonist is described as "the son and paternal grandson of suicides" (TYPU 153):

> Landsman's grandfather threw himself under the wheels of a streetcar in Lodz, which showed a degree of determination that Landsman has always admired. His father employed thirty 100 mg tablets of Nembutal, washed down with a glass of caraway vodka, a method that has much to recommend it. Add a plastic bag over the head, capacious and free of holes, and you have yourself something neat, quiet, and reliable. (TYPU 154)

In this regard the figure of the young chess genius Melekh Gaystik deserves an honorable mention. Considered to be the greatest hero of the district after winning the championship title, he ultimately shot himself in the mouth with a Colt .38 Detective special. In accordance to the name of its owner – Melekh seems to be derived from the Yiddish *malekh* or *malekhamoves*, meaning "angel" or "angel of death", and *Gaystik* is Yiddish for "ghostly" (Yiddish Dictionary Online) – the gun subsequently makes several appearances throughout the tale and is used in both uncle Hertz and Mendel's shooting.

Gaystik's last words, "*I liked things better the way they were before"* (TYPU 83), point to a synthesis of the previous two chapters. The characters themselves appear to be aware of their impossible survival, "at once recalling the fate of their 'real life' ancestors" (Richardson 166), and are "unable to cope with the fact of their own existence" (Richardson 166). This state is mirrored in the catchphrase "Strange times to be a Jew" (TYPU 4), which occurs almost immediately at the beginning of the story and is thereon repeated by several of its key figures. The various suicides can therefore be seen as "a macabre parallel to the ultimate fate of many survivors of the Holocaust" (Richardson 166), who were also struggling with survivors guilt.

This strife and its grim result are moreover implicitly signified at various occasions. The attendant serving Litvak in the bathhouse, for instance, is described as "a ghost serving

up a winding sheet to a dead man" (TYPU 340). Other examples include the mentioning of "the ghost of Professor Zamenhof", the description of the Harkavy as "half a ghost town" (TYPU 105) and the reference to the U.S. Interior Department that is tasked with preparing the province for the upcoming Reversion as "The Burial Society […] come to watch over and prepare the corpse for interment in the grave of history" (TYPU 55). These images all contribute to the ghastly atmosphere of unavoidable doom.

3. Zionist radicalism versus Diasporic secularism

3.1. Hatred for the Diaspora Jew

That atmosphere of impending loss reflects the feeling of dislocation in the Jewish community, a sentiment that is reinforced by the upcoming resettlement and forms the central motivator for most of the characters' actions. The terroristic plans of the radical Verbovers, for example, can be directly associated with this notion of homelessness. They believe that the only way to redeem themselves is by gaining "reentry into Judea" (Gruen 20). This attitude closely resembles the formative idea behind Zionism, the nationalist movement that sought to end the relegated way of living and aspired to fulfil the ancient hope of restoring a sovereign Jewish State in the Land of Israel (Ravitsky 10).

These activists looked down on the stereotype of the "Diaspora Jew" (Luz 50), which refers to those Jews who were willing to live away from their true home and settled for building new lives in the regions they were banned to. In their opinion, this "passive acceptance of violence not only brought more violence but also distorted the moral image of the Jew because his impotence was tantamount to a renunciation of the freedom in which all human dignity is grounded" (Luz 42). This view can be discerned in the relation between the Verbover Jews and the rest of the inhabitants of the Sitka District:

> When they notice Landsman's car, with its reek of plainclothesman hubris and its inflammatory double-S on the grille, they leave off yelling at one another and give Landsman the Bessarabian fish-eye. He is on their turf. He goes clean-shaven and does not tremble before God. He is not a Verbover Jew and therefore is not really a Jew at all. And if he's not a Jew, then he is nothing. (TYPU 102)

As a result, these Hasidic Jews try to isolate themselves as much as possible from the rest of the community, in particular the Jewish population that is mainly concerned with gaining a green card to stay in the District. They tend to stay behind their "imaginary ghetto wall" (TYPU 99) located in the Fifth Precinct and govern most of their affairs from that center. This inclination towards seclusion is for instance also clearly sketched in the description of the funeral of Mendel Shpilman, the son of the Verbover rabbi:

> Beyond the cemetery walls, hats and black umbrellas shelter thousands of the unworthiest of the unworthy against the rain. Deep structures of obligations and credit have determined which are permitted to enter the gates of the house of life and which must stand outside kibitzing, with rain soaking into their hose. (TYPU 197)

They furthermore differentiate themselves from the Diaspora Jews by the occasional use of Hebrew, as opposed to the Yiddish that serves as lingua franca in the novel. A linguistic turn that moreover symbolically refers back to their superior feeling towards the other inhabitants. While Yiddish is for example strongly influenced by German and Slavic dialects and therefore represents the diasporic condition, Hebrew is seen as an expression of an undiluted Jewish identity (Shreiber 278). It is the holy tongue and 'serves a mimetic function; in its sacredness it reinforces the privileged position of Jews as divinely chosen, distinct and apart from others' (Shreiber 278).

3.2. Religious Ardency

The use of this divine language also ties in with the importance attributed by the Zionist movement to the old Jewish traditions. Though Zionism in its origins appeared to be a modernist initiative that sought to achieve its goals through secular means, it also "looked backward: it employed the sacred symbols of the past and aspired to fulfill the ancient Jewish hopes" (Ravitzky 10). The religious tradition thus remained a very important factor, influencing the way in which political and cultural issues were approached (Luz xi).

This religious aspect plays a significant role in the daily routines of the Verbovers and their associates. They maintain the traditional Hasidic appearance, which gives them the slang nickname *black hats*, and they are strong advocates of respecting the laws of the Sabbath. They resort to rather extreme measures with respect to the latter, making almost the entire District an eruv: "an urban area enclosed by a wire boundary which symbolically extends the private domain of Jewish households into public areas" (Oxford dictionary). That way they can continue to carry out their illicit activities without breaking the commandment to rest on the Holy Day (Kravitz 104).

These conservative Jews furthermore assert a firm messianic belief in the figure of the Tzaddik Ha-Dor, a man who in Eastern Hasidic faith is considered to be the "all-inclusive central pillar linking heaven and earth" (Green 338). According to the Hasidic creed, every generation has one "zaddiq like Moses" (Green 338) who functions as a medium through which others can ascend to God and who assures that miracles can occur in the world (Green 338). This description closely resembles the rumors about the Verbover rabbi's son, Mendel:

> There was something in Mendele. There was a fire. This is a cold, dark place, Detectives. A grey, wet place. Mendele gave off light and warmth. You wanted to

> stand close to him. To warm your hands, to melt the ice on your beard. To banish the darkness for a minute or two. But then when you left Mendele, you stayed warm, and it seemed like there was a little more light, maybe one candle's worth in the world. (TYPU 141)

This tzaddik has the potential to reveal himself as the long-awaited Messiah, but only if the conditions are right and the Jews of his generation are worthy (TYPU 141). The impending Reversion however compels the Verbovers to take matters into their own hands. They have not much time left and therefore rely on the Zionistic notion that those conditions need to be forced (Luz 81). By assembling a private army, destroying the Dome of the Rock and obtaining a pure red heifer needed for the traditional sin offering, for instance, they believe that they will be able to force the arrival of the Messiah and the redemption of the Jewish State.

3.3. Chabon's Deconstruction

Although this religiously infused plan may seem a bit far-fetched, it ties in with what Ehud Luz calls the *Zionist wager*, "a form of faith that Zionism inherited from Judaism but filled with new meaning: the resolve to ensure the survival of the Jewish people in an apparently hopeless situation" (67). In such situations, Zionists argue, waiting to act is not an option as it can mean certain destruction. On the contrary, if there is any chance of rescue, it relies on decisive action. Having faith and acting on it can only render better results than doing nothing (Luz 67). Zealous strife, though its aim may seem implausible and unrealistic, is thus presented as the best of two options (Luz 69).

Chabon problematizes this notion in the novel by continuously emphasizing the unrealistic nature of the Verbovers' schemes. He deconstructs, for instance, some of the beliefs and traditions that they cling on to. The tzaddik is far from the expected biblical figure,

but instead turns out to be gay and uses his tefillin to tie off his veins and shoot heroin (Kravitz 102). By the time the activists are able to blow up the Dome of the Rock and start the fight for Israel, he is found dead in a run-down hotel and it is implied that he was considering suicide. Another important figure, the Boundary Maven, the one in charge of maintaining the eruv and thus guard the souls of the Jews, is suggested to have murdered Litvak using one of his strings.

The importance of the past in the Zionist ideology is moreover exaggerated to the point of ridicule. The houses of the Fifth Precinct are described as "faithful copies of lost Ukrainian originals" (TYPU 196) built along lanes "following paths first laid by the long-vanished Ukrainian goats or aurochs" (TYPU 106) and when Heskel Shpilman prepares to go to Jerusalem, he asks Zimbalist to send his men "to number every stone in this house so that it can be disassembled and then reassembled in Jerusalem" (TYPU 392). The rebbe even appears to have copied the family situation of his predecessor, both having exactly eight daughters.

The introduction of Cashdollar and the revelation that Alter Litvak, one of the key figures in the terroristic plot, works for the president of the United States further undermine the idea of the sovereign Jewish State. The plans of the Verbovers turn out to be guided by the Evangelical American government and are just part of a larger Christian scheme to remove the Muslims from Jerusalem:

> Litvak held up his right index finger. He had something, one more thing to offer the rebbe. One more clause for the contract. He had no idea how he would deliver it or if indeed it could be delivered. But as the rebbe prepared to turn his massive back on Jerusalem and on the complicated hugeness of the deal that Litvak had been putting together for months, he felt it well up in him like a chess brilliancy… (TYPU 344)

The eventual salvation the destruction of the Dome is expected to bring therefore appears doubtful. This uncertainty becomes even more apparent when Landsman compares the expression on Bina's face watching the young yids celebrate with the one she had at an engagement party where children were beating a penguin piñata. The image of the penguin occurs at various other instances and signifies the broken American promises to the Sitka Jews. Contrary to the expectations of the first generation of Jewish immigrants, the only penguins that make an appearance are the ones on the front of Cashdollar's sweater and a lonely criminal named Penguin Simkowitz. They symbolize the "imaginary land […] of Eskimo's that the Jews never quite managed to inherit" (TYPU 372). The analogy of the festive radical Jews with the joy of the children when the piñata finally releases its ordinary candy – "the kind your great-aunt could be relied upon to supply" (TYPU 359) – thus does not bode well for the hopes of the terrorists.

3.4. The Diasporic Detective

Based on these facts, it seems safe to conclude that the text posits a rather negative view on Zionism. The novel expresses a skeptical position towards the idea of Zion and the death of the tzaddik, which forms the basis for the detective story, gives the impression that the actions of this movement are rather futile and based on empty hopes. This notion is shared with the protagonist, who states it somewhat more explicitly:

> 'Fuck what is written,' Landsman says. 'You know what?' All at once he feels weary of ganefs and prophets, guns and sacrifices and the infinite gangster weight of God. He's tired of hearing about the promised land and the inevitable bloodshed required for its redemption. 'I don't care about what is written. I don't care what supposedly got promised to some sandal-wearing idiot whose claim to fame is that he was ready to

> cut his own son's throat for the sake of a hare-brained idea. I don't care about red heifers and patriarchs and locusts. A bunch of old bones in the sand. (TYPU 368)

Though the detective at some instances longs to have a belief to cling on to – "The foolish coyote faith that could keep you flying as long as you kept kidding yourself that you could fly" (TYPU 393) – he finds that he cannot and forms a stark contrast with the overly religious Verbovers: he has no problem eating cheese blintzes next to a table with left-over corned beef, attaches more value to superstition than religion and sees himself as "a dealer in entropy and a disbeliever by trade and inclination. To Landsman, heaven is kitsch, God a word and the soul, at most, the charge on your battery" (TYPU 130). He moreover has a complicated but unmistakable hatred for black hats, " a pleasurable anger, rich with layers of envy, condescension, resentment and pity" (TYPU 102).

Similar to his uncle Hertz and most of the Sitka Jews, he has no interest in returning to Judea and instead focuses on finding a home in the Alaskan district. He is a representative of the diasporic response to exclusion, a notion that is even reflected in his last name which roughly translates to "member of the tribe" (Kravitz 100). In that respect he does seem one of the most radical and makes some rather creative choices, finding a home first in the parking spot behind the Dumpsters of Berko's house and in the run-down hotel Zamenhof, the meeting place of the misfortunate and the drug addicts. Eventually though, he finds salvation in his ex-wife Bina:

> A few minutes later, Bina begins to snore. There is no doubt that her snoring has not changed in two years. It has a double-reeded hum, the bumblebee continuo of a Mongolian throat-singing. It has the slow grandeur of a whale's respiration. Landsman begins to drift across the surface of her bed and of the susurration of Bina's breath. In her arms, in the scent of her on the bed linens – a strong but pleasant smell like new

> leather gloves – Landsman feels safe for the first time in ages. Drowsy and content. (TYPU 396)

Although this romantic reunion of Landsman and Bina appears to indicate a positive ending for the detective, his future remains uncertain to the very end of the novel. In the course of the investigation he receives a notice warning him that the lease on his apartment will be terminated the day before the Reversion and the green card he eventually acquires from Cashdollar in return for his silence will most likely prove useless when at the very end of the story he decides to break that silence and inform a reporter of the schemes of the American president. Even if Landsman would be allowed to stay in the district, everything would be in the hands of the Tlingit and "Tribal P won't be hiring too many Jewboys to serve and protect" (TYPU 367).

4. The ideological position of the text

4.1 Exile or Diaspora?

The text consequently expresses a more complicated view towards the notion of galut. Even though the omniscient narrator mainly focuses on the likeable diasporic detective and deconstructs the traditions of the Zionist movement, he also portrays how the alternative can imply a rickety status in a land that does not belong to a Jewish authority. The basic dichotomy between hero and villain is not simply extended to the central Jewish question, instead the narration shows how both responses have their advantages and disadvantages. This complexity is almost explicitly expressed in the protagonist's reflections on the before-and-after picture on the card of his local gym: "Start here; finish there. Wise; happy. Chaos; order. Exile; homeland." (TYPU 399)

It is furthermore reflected in the game of chess, which plays a structural role in the novel: several streets and mountains of Sitka bear the names of chess champions and the text contains numerous descriptions and references to chess games. Important events are moreover translated into chess terms - the arrival of Berko in the Landsmans' household for example is described as "a zwischenzug, an unexpected move in the orderly unfolding of a game" (TYPU 42) – and the traits of the main characters are reflected in their chess strategies: Alter Litvak favors the controlled and emotionless style of play, Uncle Hertz's prudence and careful preparation is apparent in both his games and his statecraft and Mendel Shpilman is described as having the tendency to make the unpredictable move. Even the detective, who grew up hating the game, has his own strategy called the Landsman Gambit, which refers to his youthful tendency to throw the board on the ground.

Chess appears to function as the "cultural signifier" (Glaser 159) for Jewishness in the novel, forming a bridge across the various "sectarian lines" (TYPU 88) present in the district. When the most important piece of evidence at the crime scene in the hotel turns out to be an unfinished chess game, the impression consequently arises that this game will not only lead to the exposure of the assassin but also offer an answer to the predicament of the residents. In the end, however, it becomes clear that the setup poses a problem rather than a game:

> Just make a dull move with the bishop, here at c2. You don't even notice it at first. But after you make it, every move Black has leads directly to a mate. He can't move without finishing himself. He has no good moves." "No good moves," Bina says. "They call that *Zugzwang*,' Landsman says. "Forced to move.' It means Black would be better off if he could just pass." "But you aren't allowed to pass, are you? You have to do something, don't you? "Yes, you do," Landsman says. "Even when you know it's only going to lead you to getting checkmated." (TYPU 400)

This chess peculiarity is used to describe the life of Mendel, “a man who found himself with no good moves at all” (TYPU 401), but can also easily be seen as a metaphor for the situation of the Sitka Jews. They would be better off if nothing had to change, but the Reversion forces them to choose, even though there is no apparent favorable choice available: “Exile and resettlement of the land both lead to political *Zugzwang*. To establish a state has been impossible in the Holy land and the efforts to transfer the state to Sitka are also about to end in failure” (Kravitz 101).

After recognizing and depicting this intricacy, however, the novel notably concludes with the resolute decision of the protagonist to embrace the feeling of dislocation. True to the Landsman Gambit, the sleuth throws all arrangements out the window and fully asserts his diasporic atheism (Glaser 158). He redefines the concept of *home* as not so much a place, but rather the person he feels at ease with: “But there is no Messiah of Sitka. Landsman has no home, no future, no fate but Bina. The land that he and she were promised was bounded only by the fringes of their wedding canopy” (TYPU 411). In its final pages the text thus advocates the more nuanced view on galut, a notion that is heralded by the epigraph referring to Edward Lear’s “The Jumblies”. ‘And they went to sea in a Sieve’ forms the phrase that is repeated in each of the verses describing the Jumblies’ dangerous but enriching journey from home (see appendix).

4.2 The position of the author

This final advocacy for the diasporic response seems to reflect the position of the author himself, who describes in his “Imaginary Homelands” how he quickly realized as a child that the final sentence at the Passover seders, “Next year in Jerusalem”, was nothing more than an empty promise. His family never had any intention of packing and moving up to Israel. They were happy just where they were, a notion he poetically describes as “ We were like the

family that buys a summerhouse amid jubilance and great expectations, but finds it too much trouble to decamp there every year when it's so far and the weather is so fine at home" (Chabon, "Maps" 161)

Through the years his view towards Israel seems to have stayed pretty much the same. In an interview with Brad A. Greenberg he states that he does not lose a lot of sleep over the fact that he does not live there, even though he knows that it is supposed to be his homeland. He does, however, feel a strong connection to its history and its culture, mostly because that history corresponds with the history of his wife's family ("The literary wonder boy, Michael Chabon").

Notwithstanding this position towards Israel, he starts the aforementioned non-fictional essay with the sentence "I write from the place I live: in exile" (Chabon, "Maps" 157). Just like his Sitka Jews, the author at certain moments feels a notion of strangeness in the America he lives in. Especially when he is confronted with some testimony of a vibrant national identity, he "feels the bottom drop out" (Chabon, "Maps" 159) and eventually concludes:

> At any rate it is impossible to live intelligently as a member of a minority group in a nation that was founded every bit as firmly on enslavement and butchery as on ideals of liberty and brotherhood and not feel, at least every once and a while, that you can no more take for granted the continued tolerance of your existence here than you ought to take the prosperity or freedom you enjoy. (Chabon, "Maps" 159)

Similar to the protagonist of his story, the author does recognize the attraction of the Zionist movement, an ideology that he considers to be more "a European argument, as Milan Kundera has observed, first made by the Europeans […] It has nothing to do with the claims advanced by those old texts inked with pain and longing" (Chabon "Maps" 161). And equally

similar, he eventually decides to stick to the diasporic notion and re-evaluate what it means to be home:

> I met and married my present wife, the grandchild of European Jewish immigrants; I abandoned the novel and began the long wandering back to a place where I could feel home. I kept thinking about those Jews up there in Alaska, making their Yiddishland. […] And little by little at first, and then all at once, the idea began to assemble itself: I would build myself a home in my imagination as my wife and I were making a home in the world. (Chabon "Maps" 178)

5. Conclusion

The Yiddish Policemen's Union thus offers a rather elaborate and nuanced portrayal of Jewish Identity. The story focuses on the concept's central sentiment of dislocation and enforces that feeling by introducing echoes of the true horrific events of the Holocaust. It furthermore underscores the atmosphere of impending doom by signifying the fictional status of the Sitka Jews and their district, thereby contributing to the impression that they are already lost and simultaneously echoing the absence of such a Yiddish world in reality. The latter is reinforced by the novel's faulty use of this diasporic language. The anxious atmosphere is, finally, further highlighted by the successive suicides during the investigation and the repetition of words such as "ghost" and "grave".

The tale also gives a thorough portrayal of the possible responses towards galut. The exilic response – the Zionist longing for reentry into Jerusalem – is adequately portrayed by the terrorist Verbovers. Their way of life displays various important principles of the this nationalist movement, including the weighty status of the old traditions and its preference for using Hebrew. The omniscient narrator, however, eventually deconstructs several of these Zionist beliefs. Their Tzaddik Ha-Dor for instance, turns out to be gay and uses his prayer

bands to tie off his veins and shoot heroin. Even so, the narrative does show a more nuanced view towards Zionism, indicating that the diasporic alternative is not without disadvantages either.

In its final paragraphs though, the text eventually fully embraces the latter and thereby seems to mirror the choice of the author. Both the secular detective and Michael Chabon acknowledge the strangeness that comes with living in a land that is not under Jewish authority, but in response re-evaluate what it means to be home. Notably, not only Landsman, but also Chabon includes his loving wife in that.

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7. Appendix: Edward Lears' "The Jumblies"

Source: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/241166 (Poetry Foundation-

I

They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they went to sea:
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a Sieve they went to sea!
And when the Sieve turned round and round,
And every one cried, 'You'll all be drowned!'
They called aloud, 'Our Sieve ain't big,
But we don't care a button! we don't care a fig!
In a Sieve we'll go to sea!'
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

II

They sailed away in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they sailed so fast,
With only a beautiful pea-green veil
Tied with a riband by way of a sail,
To a small tobacco-pipe mast;
And every one said, who saw them go,
'O won't they be soon upset, you know!

For the sky is dark, and the voyage is long,

And happen what may, it's extremely wrong

In a Sieve to sail so fast!'

Far and few, far and few,

Are the lands where the Jumblies live;

Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,

And they went to sea in a Sieve.

III

The water it soon came in, it did,

The water it soon came in;

So to keep them dry, they wrapped their feet

In a pinky paper all folded neat,

And they fastened it down with a pin.

And they passed the night in a crockery-jar,

And each of them said, 'How wise we are!

Though the sky be dark, and the voyage be long,

Yet we never can think we were rash or wrong,

While round in our Sieve we spin!'

Far and few, far and few,

Are the lands where the Jumblies live;

Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,

And they went to sea in a Sieve.

IV

And all night long they sailed away;

And when the sun went down,

They whistled and warbled a moony song

To the echoing sound of a coppery gong,

In the shade of the mountains brown.

'O Timballo! How happy we are,

When we live in a sieve and a crockery-jar,

And all night long in the moonlight pale,

We sail away with a pea-green sail,

In the shade of the mountains brown!'

Far and few, far and few,

Are the lands where the Jumblies live;

Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,

And they went to sea in a Sieve.

V

They sailed to the Western Sea, they did,

To a land all covered with trees,

And they bought an Owl, and a useful Cart,

And a pound of Rice, and a Cranberry Tart,

And a hive of silvery Bees.

And they bought a Pig, and some green Jack-daws,

And a lovely Monkey with lollipop paws,

And forty bottles of Ring-Bo-Ree,

And no end of Stilton Cheese.

Far and few, far and few,

Are the lands where the Jumblies live;

Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,

And they went to sea in a Sieve.

VI

And in twenty years they all came back,

In twenty years or more,

And every one said, 'How tall they've grown!'

For they've been to the Lakes, and the Torrible Zone,

And the hills of the Chankly Bore;

And they drank their health, and gave them a feast

Of dumplings made of beautiful yeast;

And everyone said, ‘If we only live,

We too will go to sea in a Sieve,—

To the hills of the Chankly Bore!’

Far and few, far and few,

Are the lands where the Jumblies live;

Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,

And they went to sea in a Sieve