

## **“Every Individual Should Feel As If”: Exilic Memory and Third Generation Holocaust Writing**

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### **Abstract**

*The experience of the Holocaust has left an indelible mark upon the Jewish psyche. Initially, this trauma was expressed through eyewitness accounts, and then the “second generation,” the children of survivors, wrote of their own traumas. The third generation writers, whose relationship with the Holocaust is more attenuated, continue to evoke the trauma of Holocaust in their texts. By engaging particular Jewish motifs, often modeled on constructions of “collective memory” and the imagery and language of the Haggadah,, young North American writers challenge conventional ideas about “the witness” and testimony in order to perpetuate the structure of collective memory by “witnessing through imagination.” Three literary works, Aryeh Lev-Stollman’s *The Dialogues of Time and Entropy*, Nicole Krauss’s *The History of Love*, and Nathan Englander’s *The Ministry of Special Cases* provide examples of this technique.*

**Keywords:**Holocaust, American literature, memory, trauma

Writing about the Holocaust, even the writing of eyewitnesses and survivors, continues to present readers with a variety of issues regarding the relationship between fact, fiction, and narrative. Critiques most commonly raise questions regarding the viability of “memory,” especially when the “memories” at hand involve severe trauma and the expression and description of indescribable horror. These eyewitness narratives prompt questions about and have an impact upon concepts of testimony and witnessing, “collective memory,” and the relationship between memory and history. Consequently, as we move further away from the Holocaust itself, it becomes more difficult to determine the boundary between history and fiction, and conclusions regarding this distinction remain ambiguous. Historians such as Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka have wrestled with the issues of “collective memory” in a general context, while the historian James E. Young’s work addresses the relationship between history and memory as it relates specifically to the Holocaust, but his conclusion perpetuates the difficulty in establishing clear and definite boundaries. Young explains, “If there is a line between fact and fiction, it may by necessity be a winding border that tends to bind these two categories as much as it separates them, allowing each side to dissolve occasionally into the other” (Young, 1997 p. 52).

If critics find themselves debating the problematic nature of fictional elements in eyewitness and autobiographical accounts such as Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* and Elie Weisel’s *Night*, issues regarding the proprietary nature of memory and its relationship to experience, particularly as these relate to fiction and narrative, come to the fore as children of survivors, those who go by the designation of the “second generation,” come on the scene. These writers, speaking as children of survivors but not survivors or eyewitnesses themselves, attempt “to articulate their relationship to an inherited, not personally lived, past that has nevertheless become an integral part of their own identity” (Goertz, 1998, p.33). One term employed to describe the specific qualities of second generation experience is “postmemory,” a term introduced by Marianne Hirsch in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. In a recent article Hirsch provides an updated definition for her neologism.

Hirsch explains, "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but were nonetheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch, 2008, p.103). Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" attempts to address the experience of the children of survivors whose lives are profoundly impacted by an experience that organizes itself through what seems to be a genetic sense of absence and loss.

The centrality of absence in the experience of the second generation may address the rather mystifying concept of "postmemory" which, on its face, seems a somewhat difficult term to comprehend. How are we to understand what "post-" means in relation to "memory," since "memory" is by definition product of experience (both real and imagined) after the fact? Ruth Franklin expresses the concern that "postmemory" is one of a number of "memory typologies, each less coherent and more diluted than the last" (Franklin, 2011, p. 224) Franklin's critique points to the fact that what is being described by "postmemory" already exists as the process of extended and inter-generational transmission of memory. Other terms that have been employed to describe this intergenerational transmission of trauma include "appropriated memory," "vicarious memory," and "cultural memory" among others. Additionally, each of these pre-existing terms draws attention to the permeable nature of the boundaries of memory, suggesting that memory transits through a variety of limits (familial generations, historical periods, physical locations, etc.).

While "postmemory" may offer a sense of the experience specific to the children of survivors (or the children of some survivors since this group is anything but monolithic in its experience), it is difficult to see how it would apply beyond the second generation to the most recent group of writers addressing the Holocaust, what I will refer to, following Jessica Lang, as "third generation Holocaust writers" who "mark a second transition, or another remove, from the eyewitness[...]" (Lang, 2009, pp. 45-46). For writers such as Aryeh Lev Stollman, Nicole Krauss, Nathan Englander and others of this "third generation" the process of "witnessing through imagination" provides access to the Holocaust. While they too struggle with a profound sense of absence, they make it quite clear that their narratives attempt to bear witness to the Holocaust through the creation of empathic fiction.

The concept of "witnessing through imagination," like "postmemory," suggests a conundrum, especially since the position of "witness" is afforded a place of privilege in the construction of ostensibly "objective" legal and "secular" historical narratives. In these situations (that is, in the invoking of the law and "history"), the "witness" is assumed to be able to provide an unmediated report of what "actually" happened. Therefore, for the purposes of law and "history," someone who "witnesses through imagination" could be accused of not being a witness at all, while an imagined memory would simply be a fiction by another name. At this point, the tendency of the critic might be to begin to deconstruct or redefine such terms as "witness," "witnessing," "memory," "testimony," and so forth. I want to suggest that when reading the fiction of third generation Jewish writers about the Holocaust (and those who will come after them), what is actually at issue, what is being reconfigured and redefined, is a relationship to "history." Rather than locating the Holocaust within the context of a view of history that presumes the existence of teleological "progress" in the interpretation of human events, and that therefore assigns "meaning" to those events suggesting their assimilation toward a greater universal or historical whole, these Jewish writers move away from a universalizing memorialization of the Holocaust through the invocation of a Jewish form of narrative that develops memory and remembering as processes in a living open-ended history, one that places the Holocaust through a specifically Jewish historical context. The objectives of "witnessing through imagination" in this context include the development and expression of empathic memory, as well as the maintenance of cultural memory and continuity.

One model for cultivating the process of "witnessing through imagination" can be found in the *Haggadah*, a Jewish text that invites its participants to remember and re-experience the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. The *Haggadah* (literally "the telling") provides the narrative of an emancipation that comes only after generations of oppression and hardship. Not only does the sojourn in Egypt that is central to the story leave the Israelites suffering, their leave-taking is hurried, violent, and comes at the end of a series of horrendous events, the plagues, that afflict the land and the people. In terms of its content, the *Haggadah* is the ritual presentation of a defining national trauma, presenting the narrative in fragments, interpolated by commentary and explanation. We do not, and in terms of the text itself we *cannot*, take in the narrative or the trauma whole.

At the same time, the repetition of the process (one of the hallmarks of traumatic experience is the compulsion to repeat) is articulated as an ethical requirement, and participation is not passive but experiential, involving participants in the tastes as well as the sounds of the past.

On a basic level, through re-telling, the *Haggadah* provides structural and theoretical models that reinforce the idea of cultural memory while the text also rehearses the process of “witnessing through imagination.” This contemporary term, designating a method of trans-generational transmission of “memory,” seems particularly apt as a description for the transmission of the memory of exile and loss associated with both the devastating experience of enslavement and suffering in Egypt and the brutality of the Holocaust. The *Haggadah* and second and third generation Holocaust literature share a “connection to the past [...] not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation” (Hirsch, p. 107). The *Haggadah* actually anticipates this process, combining historical, cultural and personal experience:

In each generation every individual should feel as though he or she had actually been redeemed from Egypt, as it is said: “You shall tell your children on that day, saying ‘It is because of what Adonai did for me when I went free out of Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8). (Rabinowicz, 1982p. 67).

The concrete nature of this injunction is reinforced by its placement within the Passover *sefer* itself. Participants are enjoined to “feel as though” they were redeemed just before the blessing and eating of the foods that serve as physical symbols of the experience of redemption. As a result, the psychological empathy the participants are encouraged to experience — they should feel as if they were personally redeemed — is mirrored in the conflation of time represented by the concrete experience of consuming the food that was both “there then” (during the original exodus), and “here now.”

One could object to the comparison of a liturgical text, read in community, with a work of fiction read by an individual, but such an objection insists upon boundaries between genres that Jewish literature and liturgy have some history of blurring. Examples of this “genre-bending” can be seen in liturgical poems such as “*Eleh Ezkerah*” (“These I Will Remember”), recited during the Yom Kippur service and “*Arzei ha Levanon Adirei ha Torah*” (a commemoration of ten martyrs), recited on Tisha B’Av. In both these cases a series of traumatic events are commemorated through the creation of the historical fiction that the events all share the same anniversary date. Consequently, midrashic or exegetical narratives (non-liturgical texts) develop a liturgical purpose even when the adaptations involve the introduction of historical fiction (Stern and Mirsky, 2006, p.143). More recently, Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin (1983) cite another example of literary memorializing that conflates the secular and religious genres, in the *yizker-bukho* memorial book. They explain that different titles for these texts indicate their various purposes, for example distinguishing between the use of the term “... *yizker-bukh* indicating that the book is intended to serve as a substitute for the traditional memorial service; *sefer*, suggesting that the book is to be regarded as a holy text” (Kugelmass and Boyarin, p.2). All of these examples illustrate a fluid relationship between Jewish literature and Jewish liturgy, although these texts all less popular and less accessible than the *Haggadah*.

There might, however, be another possible point of objection to the linking of the *Haggadah* with Holocaust fiction. Ruth Franklin, commenting on the audacious claim “as one second-generation character puts it, ‘that we went through it [the Holocaust],’” (Franklin, p.227) cites the same passage from the *Haggadah* that I have quoted above (“In every generation...”), but Franklin takes issue with the idea that the dictum to “feel as though” can be transferred from the *Haggadah* to the Holocaust. Had Franklin’s analysis gone on to compare the difference between appropriation (which seems to motivate the second-generation writers she discusses) and empathy (what the *Haggadah* describes) her critique of the allusion would have been persuasive. Instead, she claims “...there is a somewhat more complicated theological basis for this [‘feeling as if’] that cannot simply be transposed onto the Holocaust. In a literary context it is simply bad taste” (Franklin, p.227). Franklin does not elaborate upon the “theological,” issue raised by the comparison of these trans-generational narratives, nor does she explain how the “literary context” creates offense. Given the literary nature of the *Haggadah* on the one hand — it is, after all, a text that is *about* telling a story — and the theological questions raised by the Holocaust on the other, a conflation of Holocaust memory and Passover rhetoric and references offers a strategy for structuring narratives that engage traumatic experiences as part of an inter-generational witnessing. As Jewish tradition demonstrates the boundaries between liturgy and literature have a history of permeability.

In fact, the *Haggadah* is a complex and multi-faceted literary work including a variety of literary genres (exegesis, folktale, poetry, narrative), while the structure of the text — including its interpolations and interpretive excursions, its deferral of any redemptive end — anticipates the qualities of many trauma narratives. And while Franklin's associations with the *Haggadah* may be specifically theological, there is no reason why such limits should apply to all readers of a text with such a broad distribution throughout the American Jewish population. While there is little doubt that there is a theological component to the story the *Haggadah* tells, there is no reason why it must be read exclusively as theology.

In fact, there is a strong argument to be made that particular literary strategies employed by the *Haggadah* initiate "exilic memory," a particularly Jewish position toward cultural memory and history. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, a well-regarded Israeli historian notes, "The Passover Haggadah, a document that may be seen as the foundation of exilic memory, embodies the notion of continuity within exile and of exile within the domain of revelation and also liberation" (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2007, p.533). Raz-Krakotzkin is careful to leave the concept of "exile" undefined, so that while it *can* have theological connotations ("exile within the domain of revelation") it is not restricted to theological discourse ("and also liberation"). Additionally, the *Haggadah* presents us with an unfinished story since the Israelites do not arrive at the Promised Land in the process of the telling. The story instantiates an experience of "exilic memory" by remembering exile, by keeping both those who tell the story and those who the story speaks about outside or exiled from their final destination, further demonstrating how the recapitulation of a traumatic and defining narrative perpetuates its relevance while deferring the much anticipated end. By not providing a determined or providential end to its narrative, the *Haggadah* offers an example of the Jewish historical perspective as the Israeli historian, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, defines it. "The acceptance of the paradigm of modern historiography implies the active rejection of the historical consciousness that was the core of Jewish self-definition, and was expressed in the concept of exile. The attempt to narrate the exilic past of the Jews as autonomous and continuous actually stands in opposition to the main and common perception embodied in the concept, which rejects the existence of any meaningful history in this sense" (Raz-Krakotzkin, p. 531).

As a foundational text for exilic memory, the *Haggadah* invites readers to participate empathically in remembering events that dramatically and traumatically affected the Jewish people. Narratives about the Holocaust, like stories of the exodus from Egypt, recount experiences of trauma and displacement that continue to affect and shape Jewish identity. The recitation of the *Haggadah*, with its injunction that participants "feel as though" the experience is their own, instantiates the process of exilic memory. In both the ancient and modern situations a sense of redemption may be suspended as the narratives recount the difficulties and traumas attendant to prolonged suffering. To emphasize the sense of deferral, the text anticipates and continues to hold the promise of redemption in abeyance, further dramatizing a condition of the exilic experience and perpetuating the construct of "witnessing through imagination" as an intergenerational imperative.

The process of inter- and trans-generational transmission is further reinforced by the centrality of children in the *Haggadah*. The portion of the text involving the Four Sons, whose questions anticipate the narrative that is about to unfold, demonstrates different ways that participants might identify with the narrative and establishes the experience of "telling" as one that develops a sense of shared trans-generational identification. Children also take an active part in the process of the *seder* by asking the "Four Questions" that set up the various symbols and events that will be explained through the experience of the reading of the *Haggadah*. Finally, it is traditional for a child to open the door for Elijah the Prophet. This image of the child awaiting the harbinger of the Messiah, and therefore of Redemption, crystallizes the anticipatory nature of exilic memory represented in the *Haggadah*'s narrative. The empty chair that has been left for the guest who never arrives further concretizes the sense of absence.

As a text that is accessible because of its ready availability and its translation into English, the *Haggadah* plays a significant role in structuring American Jewish concepts of identity, memory, "history," and narrative, even for non-religious American Jews. (Satlow, 2006, p.56). As the most common religious text in Jewish homes in America, according to Carol B. Balin's research (2008), the Passover *Haggadah* serves as a touchstone in its confluence of Jewish narrative, memory, history and identity, and it is more than likely that the Jewish American writers of the third generation have some level of familiarity with the text and its stories.

Since the story of the liberation from Egypt serves as a response to a deep and defining experience of trauma, it is reasonable to assume that the *Haggadah* would influence, even if subconsciously, these Jewish American writers as they investigate this defining trauma for Jews of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One might say that, through the *Haggadah* “witnessing through imagination” (“every individual should *feel* as if...”) becomes part of the American Jewish experience *per se*.

Moreover, the experiential nature of the Passover *seder* establishes a dynamic relationship between narrative and exilic memory that traverses from “then” to “now,” from “that bread” to “this bread of affliction” and thus allows the reader to enter the ahistorical space of exilic memory. If this process of “witnessing through imagination” is effective for communicating the experience of a trauma as distant as the exodus from Egypt, how much more effective might it be before remembering and witnessing more recent traumatic events? It should not come as much of a surprise, then, that contemporary North American Jewish fiction writers would engage various elements of the *Haggadah* — its narrative strategy, even elements of its language and imagery — as part of their own encounter with Jewish memory, and that they would choose children, who play key roles in the *Haggadah*’s story and ritual, to be the narrators or foci of this “witnessing through imagination.” A brief consideration of works by Aryeh Lev Stollman, Nicole Krauss, and Nathan Englander demonstrates some of the ways these strategies can be employed.

In Aryeh Lev Stollman’s collection of short stories, *The Dialogues of Time and Entropy* (2003), many of the stories involve the process of children embodying, metaphorically and even physically, a sense of loss that is not as much their own as it is the unspoken loss of the adults around them. The appropriation of another’s loss leads to the radical fragmentation of the young narrator in the collection’s first story, “Mr. Mitochondria.” By internalizing the identity of his dead brother, whose name his parents will not mention, the young narrator, Adar, attempts to keep his brother alive at the expense of his own psychological well-being. Only after Adar recovers from his own serious illness, that is only after his parents must confront the potential loss of both boys, can Adar’s parents speak his brother’s name, externalizing the brother’s memory and making Adar whole.

In “Enflourage,” this projection of loss is more overt and directly tied to Holocaust memory. This story is narrated by Alexander, a rabbi’s twelve year-old son, who develops a friendship with an older woman, Berenice, whose husband, the Cantor, is a Holocaust survivor. When Berenice and the Cantor arrive in Windsor, Alex’s maternal grandmother, whose health is seriously deteriorating, has moved in with Alex’s family. During the day, Alex notes his grandmother “stayed quietly in her room [...] but at night she would wander through the house screaming, ‘Don’t make a liar out of me!’ or ‘That’s a pile of crap! You can’t fool me!’” Also at this time Alex begins to have a recurring dream in which he cannot swallow: “My throat turned to rubber and got stuck. I could not even breathe. I’d wake up thinking I was choking and then realize I was alright” (Stollman, p.22).

While the association between Alex’s grandmother’s nighttime tirades and Alex’s fear of suffocating seems logical, Alex correlates the dreams specifically with the arrival of Berenice and the Cantor in Windsor. Alex spends whole days with Berenice, and they are “friends at first sight.” As they spend time together, Berenice tells Alex about her past. “When I was a little girl,” she tells him, “I thought the moon was sent to watch over me [...] I still believe in the moon. Even after what happened to my baby. If my baby had lived, he would be as old as you are and I bet as handsome. My instinct tells me he was a boy” (Stollman, pp. 28-29). That very same evening Alex’s choking dream recurs. This time, however, after he awakens and assures himself that he’s okay, he sees “a beautiful guardian angel.” It is Berenice’s son. Alex remarks, “Now I have the friend I really need, I kept thinking in my dream, now I have a friend” (Stollman, p.29). Alex, it seems, has become both the external and internal representative of Berenice’s lost child, a living memory.

And for Berenice, this lost pregnancy is pivotal as it represents the arbitrary pain and loss around which her life is organized. She associates the lost pregnancy with the Cantor’s experiences during WWII. This becomes clear when she tells Alex “in such a low whisper” he could “barely hear, the Cantor was married once before and even had a baby, a boy, but they were killed. Can you imagine? They rounded them up in the synagogue. [...] [T]he Cantor was almost shot. Isn’t it amazing, something as small as a bullet can take away a life? Well, my baby was no larger than a walnut when it almost killed me” (Stollman, pp. 31-32). That evening, Alex has an even more horrific choking dream. Standing in, substituting as the embodiment of more and more people, he is being smothered.

Expressing the wish to silence the nighttime ranting of his demented grandmother, bringing Berenice's lost baby back as the friend he needs, and keeping alive those indiscriminately rounded up in Nazi raids, Alex's dreams of his throat closing up serve as the somatic consequence of his unconscious fantasies. He not only witnesses through imagination, his imagination brings on suffering. And he continues to dream these dreams until the Cantor, in what appears to be a holy reverie, literally lives out his own dream, singing a Tosca *aria* instead of the appropriate Hebrew prayer on the Jewish New Year. (He had always wanted to be an opera singer, Berenice had told Alex.) As the Cantor steps down in embarrassment, Berenice leaves the synagogue and, in the middle of the night, leaves town. With his grandmother in a nursing home and Berenice and the Cantor gone, Alex's nightmares stop. Yet getting out from underneath these losses (of his grandmother's sanity, of Berenice's baby, of the Cantor's first family and the Holocaust) also takes a toll. "I would wake up with a great yearning," Alex says, "missing someone so badly" (Stollman, pp.40 – 41).

Berenice's hurried flight from Windsor — a departure reminiscent of the flight of the Israelites from Egypt — frees Alex from his nightmares but also separates him from his friend, both in the real world and in his dream life. Connected to the Holocaust through a series of associations (the bullet that kills the Cantor's child during the Holocaust reminds Berenice of her lost child through a miscarriage, and this "child" returns as Alex's friend), Alex's experience illustrates how the temporal expanse of exilic memory cooperates with the empathy of "witnessing through imagination," so that the Holocaust encounters the "feeling *as if*" expressed as obligation in the *Haggadah*. Alex's experience of the other's loss is both startlingly empathic and, at the same time, never quite his own. The loss of the other and her memories, initiated with the relocation of both his grandmother and Berenice, suggests that the displacement or exile of the other can open up a space of liberation or relief that further perpetuates the sense of absence and loss.

A more explicit illustration of a child embodying the Holocaust in the present, while serving as the living memory of the past, appears in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005). The novel focuses on a young teenage girl, Alma, and her search for the writer of *The History of Love*, a novel that her father gave to her mother and that her mother is now translating. Alma is named after the love interest in the fictional book, while Krauss' novel centers on the contemporary Alma's attempt to find the original Alma as well as the book's author. Structured as a series of intersecting but discontinuous narratives, the novel reveals the history of *The History of Love* from a series of perspectives, ultimately bringing the young Alma together with the novel's writer, Leo Gursky. Discussions of the Krauss' novel, like Jessica Lang's article "The History of Love, the Contemporary Reader and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory" (2009), focus on the interaction between Leo, a survivor of Nazi persecution although not of the actual camps, and the young Alma. The juxtapositions of their experiences, culminating in their meeting, invoke the various losses suffered during and after the Holocaust. The loss of adolescent love, of physical displacement and relocation and missed communication, serve as starting points for the recognition of ongoing and perpetuated loss and absence.

While the trans-generational relationship between Alma(s) and Leo enacts the long-term consequences of the Holocaust, there is a young character in the novel that actually bears the full weight of the Holocaust in his very identity. This is "Bird," Alma's younger brother, (his nickname has no clear provenance), who Alma introduces:

When I was born my mother named me after every girl in a book my father gave her called *The History of Love*. She named my brother Emanuel Chaim after the Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who buried milks cans filled with testimony in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Jewish cellist Emanuel Feuermann, who was one of the great musical prodigies of the twentieth century, and also the Jewish writer of genius Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel, and her uncle Chaim, who was a joker, a real clown, made everyone laugh like crazy, and who died by the Nazis. (Krauss, p. 35)

As "Chaim," the Hebrew word for *life*, Bird is a walking memorial, a living record of both loss and hope. This isn't something Bird appreciates, however, and he doesn't respond his given name. Alma notes, "When people asked him his name, he made something up" (Krauss, p.35.) Eventually, he does allow one person to call him "Chaim." Bird makes an exception for Mr. Goldstein, the janitor of Bird's Hebrew school, and the person who teaches Bird a compelling yet otherwise inaccessible spiritual form of Judaism (or at least *Jewishness*). But even when Mr. Goldstein calls him "Chaim," Bird resists taking the name on as his own, saying, "Chaim" is "the name he calls me," describing his relationship to the name as one of passive acceptance.

Mr. Goldstein, like Leo Gursky, has survived the war (rumor has it in a Siberian labor camp), but unlike Leo, whose Holocaust experience is represented in the losses of personal connection and love, resulting in a sense of general alienation, Mr. Goldstein remains directly connected to the Jewish community. And while Alma's meeting with Leo allows for a sense of continuity between past and present on a personal level, demonstrating that Leo's love and his expression of it through his writing were not wholly in vain, Bird's relationship with Mr. Goldstein reaffirms the appropriateness of "Chaim," of life, putting Bird/Chaim on a path toward a meaningful Jewish existence that will vindicate the loss both of history (Emanuel Ringelbaum) and family (Uncle Chaim) at the hands of the Nazis.

Additionally, it is through Mr. Goldstein that Bird comes to see himself as part of a continuous Jewish legacy since, as he tells Alma, he may be a *lamed vovnik*, "one of the thirty-six people that the existence of the world depends on" (Krauss, pp.52 -53). Bird takes his role as a *lamed vovnik* very seriously, and when Mr. Goldstein suffers a fall, Bird believes he may be responsible for Mr. Goldstein's compromised situation, and decides to make amends by doing something selfless. Realizing that Alma is on some kind of search, Bird volunteers to help Alma find whoever she is looking for. His desire to help his sister provides the mechanism that eventually brings a copy of the manuscript of *The History of Love* back to Leopold Gursky. In the novel, immediately following Bird's declaration of his intentions, Leopold contacts Alma. Bird — who is trying to solve a "mystery" that he knows he doesn't understand, and who's working only with his imagination — ultimately provides the opportunity for the testimony of the living witness. It is precisely Bird's empathy for pain and loss that is not his own, but his acting *as if* the pain is his, that allows for the union of Leopold and Alma. As a result, a living witness can be heard. Rather than looking to Alma's more mature and overtly self-aware narrative to illustrate the various traumas contained in Alma's family story — her father's death, her mother's loneliness, the consequences of the Holocaust — we need to listen to Bird's voice, a less obvious but equally engaged, voice within the novel. Like the "Four Sons" in the *Haggadah* whose questions present a variety of generational relationships to the Passover narrative, Bird serves as a conduit between past and present, loss and life, for those who have traversed the trauma that has come to define modern Jewish experience.

While Stollman and Krauss address the experience of the Holocaust through creating characters who are survivors, the children of survivors or even the children of those children, Nathan Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007) never directly mentions the Holocaust or those who might have experienced it. Yet despite any overt discussion of the "Jewish problem" and its "solution," Englander's novel deals with the themes of memory, remembering, purposeful forgetting, erasure and disappearance that are hallmarks of Holocaust narratives and that the anxieties that arise around the Holocaust and Holocaust testimony and the trauma for those who remain.

Kaddish Poznan, the main character of Englander's novel, is a man without much family history who makes his living ensuring that others have even less. Named after the prayer recited for the dead, Kaddish engages in an attempt at memorial erasure, and in a lovely parallel, by removing the names from gravestones, Kaddish replicates the absence of any mention of death in the prayer that shares his name. Kaddish wipes out names on Jewish tombstones at the behest of the now accomplished adult children in the Buenos Aires Jewish community, who want to eradicate the memory of ill-repute in their family histories. Kaddish accommodates these requests by defacing family graves, thereby obliterating the names, and ostensibly the memories, of those who have come before. For this Jewish community, Kaddish's services are meant to engender forgetting, even though this "forgetting" requires a certain kind of violence against the past. Kaddish's job, therefore, has him enacting an ongoing paradox since his actions seek to create new memories through an attempt at consciously and volitionally forgetting. For those who employ him, Kaddish becomes the embodiment of remembering what they desperately want to forget.

The desire to erase the past inevitably results in a tortured remembering, a fact that manifests itself physically when Kaddish and his wife, Lillian, have nose jobs, a procedure that their son, Pato, finds ridiculous and rejects. Much is made in the novel of the Poznan family's generous nasal endowments, and while it is never overtly stated, it is clear that their noses mark them as Jews for all to see. When Kaddish negotiates payment in rhinoplasty for "cleansing" a tombstone for a famous Jewish plastic surgeon, he conflates compensation with his "paying through the nose" as the price for doing his job.

In setting up these terms of compensation, Englander suggests a parallel in these two types of effacement since both seek to radically remove what is perceived as “objectionable” from the familial body.

While Kaddish’s surgery is a success, Lillian’s proves disastrous. Most disturbing to her is the fact that she can no longer see her son’s face in her own when she looks in the mirror. When their son is inexplicably “disappeared,” Lillian’s nose literally falls off her face. Her distress at the loss of their shared physiognomy, a feature she shares with Pato and which is stereotypically associated with Jews generally, brings home the dangers inherent in Kaddish’s willingness to deface Jewish graves, thereby erasing the coherence of the Jewish past. The convergence of the themes of implied genetic Jewishness, “cleansing,” memory and forgetting in the novel lead the reader to associate these ideas with the Holocaust and its virulent anti-Semitism, regardless of the fact that the Holocaust, like the names on the gravestones, is under erasure. Yet it is impossible not to see that the giant nose that is part of the Poznan family, and therefore part of a specific genetics, marks them, stereotypically, as Jews. Kaddish’s desire to be rid of his nose and to look like everyone else, to assimilate, not only proves emotionally destabilizing but physically compromising as well. In Lillian’s case, giving up her nose neither makes her more like those around her, nor does it save her son from being inexplicably snatched from his own home right from under his father’s newly constructed nose.

For his part, Pato’s disgust at his parents’ surgical re-creation suggests a form of assimilationist denial rather than an embracing of his identity. From the outset of the novel Pato seems to rebel against his father’s identity rather than present the possibility of an alternative for a Jewish future. Humiliated by his father’s work, Pato rebukes his father for remaining consistently involved with the shame of the Jewish past. On two occasions, both fairly early in the novel, Pato’s complaints contain allusions to the Passover *Haggadah*. In the first, Pato lambastes Kaddish:

“I won’t live your life, and I don’t understand why you’re living theirs.”

“Whose?” Kaddish said. He had no idea.

“The Jews,” Pato said. “They reject you since birth and you still play the role they gave you. A son of a whore for your own self is your concern, why would you want to be that for somebody else? Why not be done with them completely? Get out of this business and out of the neighborhood and start a new life.”

“You’ll see in time. There’s no running away,” Kaddish said. “If you do, when you’re old it’s much worse. You’ll forget your name. You’ll forget what you’re saying as the words come out of your mouth. Then, without anything left you’ll remember who you are and you’ll find yourself afraid and alone among strangers.” (Englander, p.52)

This interaction casts Pato as the evil son of the Passover *Haggadah*, the son who asks “What did the Lord do for me?” Pato’s refusal to identify with *them*, with the Jews, takes Kaddish by surprise (“He had no idea”) and leads directly to a discussion of the danger of forgetting, specifically forgetting where you come from and who you are — a Jew. In identifying himself as radically separate from his father and “the Jews,” Pato attempts to place himself beyond familial and communal affiliation, but Kaddish admonishes him that eventually the memory of Jewish identity returns. The remembering of that Jewish identity, when it inevitably comes, will result in a kind of exile, a life “alone among strangers.”

In another tirade against Kaddish, Pato refers explicitly to the text of the *Haggadah*. Pato announces: “You’re lazy. You’re a failure. You’ve kept us down. You embarrass us. You cut off my finger. You ruined my life.” In the grand tradition of the *dayeinu*, it was a list of his father’s deficiencies” (Englander, p. 61). Here Pato presents the reader with an inverted *Dayeinu*. Where the *Haggadah* lists all of the good things God has bestowed upon the Jewish people, each of which would have been enough, this is a list of all of Kaddish’s inconsistencies and failures, each of which would have been enough. Pato’s similarity to the *Haggadah*’s “evil son” and the inverted *dayeinu* illustrate a connection to the Jewish past that Pato seeks to deny, just as traces of the names remain in the marks of erasure after Kaddish chisels away at the headstones. And the significance of this presence, even this luminal presence, becomes clear when Pato is disappeared, for disappearance is radical absence, absence that leaves no trace, no record, no mark. Once he is disappeared, Kaddish and Lillian discover that the more they attempt to prove the disappearance of their son the more his very existence is called into question.



This, then, is the danger of an absolute forgetting, of accepting the idea that only those who were present, who physically witnessed an event, can give testimony, can have a real memory. If we do not allow for the telling and retelling, the re-presentation, we facilitate eradication.

This is a lesson that the *Haggadah* teaches by engaging of “witnessing through imagination” in the maintenance of exilic memory. It is also where an essential point of contact between the ongoing construction of exilic memory and the continuing remembrance of the Holocaust. The writers of the third and eventually of the fourth generation will not only write about, from and for cultural memory, but they will inscribe a specifically Jewish way of remembering. Through these narratives that allow us to “feel as if,” we remain resolute to never forget.

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