

The Force of Jewish Law in Isaac Bashevis Singer's Fiction

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Abstract

This study evaluates a collection of Isaac Bashevis Singer's short stories that portray the lives of the Jews living in small towns in Poland before World War II; how Jewish law enforcement shaped the community as a whole and every individual Jew abiding by the law. To show the effects of law on the individual characters' relationship with other Jews in the stories, we cast light on the Jewish people's reception of those characters, who are more or less different from the rest of the Jewish community. Moreover, the Devil's part in assisting and endorsing the characters' decisions to pursue their iconoclastic beliefs and goals is explained. We see Singer's characters, being exposed to law, attempt to fulfil their desires and also express their reluctance to accept the law, and consequently we see the communal law's resolution in determining the defiant characters' fate and their isolation from the rest of the people.

Keywords: Jewish law, Isaac Bashevis Singer's fiction, Community, Devil, Freedom, Isolation.

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Introduction

Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories involve characters' perpetual entanglement with Jewish law in a community where people must live according to written and unwritten rules issued to prevent Jews from sinning and also the community from dispersion. These rules are known as commandments, since God commanded people to obey them. God's commandments are issued to protect the community from evil and for people's ultimate well-being. Talmud, the most important book in Jewish culture, is the source of Jewish law. The solidarity of Jews is attributed to reading and following the rules found in Talmud. As a result, the values of the community are more stressed than individual values. On the other hand, people are born free to choose their fate, and the Devil is lurking around to seduce a person or the whole community into misusing their freedom. Singer's stories happen in this interface between the community and law on the one hand, and evil and freedom on the other hand. In this case, the community and law are two factors that foster a sense of solidarity among Jews, and evil and freedom are deemed to be the threats to the solidarity of the community and its law. This paper focuses on a selection of seven short stories by Singer and his portrayal of the complete isolation or loss that afflicts the characters or the whole community as a consequence of violating Jewish law.

Historical Context

It is a belief across the world that Jews are remarkably resilient in difficult conditions and have been able to adapt to new situations and places throughout their long history. This resilience owes not much to individual Jewish efforts to keep faith in hard times and survive but to Jewish people as a whole and as a community. According to the Hebrew Bible, if the children of Israel observe the laws commanded

by God, He promises them that “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:18). Among these laws and probably the best-known of them are the Ten Commandments, with which God has “made a covenant with thee and with Israel” (Exod. 34:27). In Judaism, the Commandments include the standards of right and wrong that people must keep regardless of time and place. If any member of the community does not keep God’s covenant and commits any of those abominations, he or she “shall be cut off from among their people” (Lev. 18:29), because if the lawbreaker remains in the community after transgressing the law, that sin will plague the whole community.

Jewish nations have been all around the world throughout their long and turbulent history. In his introduction to Jewish history, David Myers explains that at least for two thousand years the Jews have lived outside of their homeland, the land of Israel. During this long time, they have lived in “diaspora communities” in various locations around the world. According to him, what unified these internationally dispersed nations was that firstly, they had the idea that they were chosen by God to be a great nation; secondly, they strongly believed that they cannot be indifferent to their “co-religionists” and felt a “collective responsibility” to other Jews (Myers 2017, chap. 1).

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, a number of them moved to the territories of the old Polish Commonwealth in Eastern Europe and settled in small towns called “Shtetls.” As Samuel Kassow, a professor of history, defines it, a Shtetl “connoted a type of Jewish settlement marked by a compact Jewish population distinguished from their mostly gentile peasant neighbors by religion, occupation, language, and culture” (Kassow 2010). Yiddish was the

language spoken in the Shtetls, which made them significantly different from their Slavic speaking Jewish neighbors (Kassow 2010). In other words, Yiddish became a communal identity for the Jews living in the Shtetls.

Yiddish Language and Jewish Roots

This communal identity expressed itself in the works of Yiddish literary writers such as Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, and Mendele Sforim in the nineteenth century and Isaac Bashevis Singer in the twentieth century. Although it was a vernacular language, Yiddish was used by authors so as to save it from disappearance when the economic decline of the Shtetls forced many Jews to leave their homeland. However, the aforementioned writers were not so happy with Yiddish. As Bashevis Singer and Robert Wolf state in their essay on Yiddish literature, the Yiddish writer could not write about peasants, hunters, coal miners, sportsmen, ships, airplanes, universities, and a thousand other objects and people, because the language lacked the names for thousands of objects and activities to which all these things are connected (Singer and Wolf 1995, 119). In other words, Yiddish was not an appropriate medium for writing about the secular world. In his autobiographical work, *A Young Man in Search of Love*, Singer indicates the discontent of a number of modern Jews with Yiddish: “Even such Yiddish writers as Mendele Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz called Yiddish a jargon. The Zionists considered Yiddish the language of the Diaspora of which the Jews had to divest themselves along with the exile” (Singer 1978, 7).

For Singer, however, Yiddish was more than merely a medium for storytelling. According to David Seed, Singer attacked a Communist-Yiddish periodical in 1962 for what he believed to be an “attempt to purge the language of its religious sentiment,” because he assumed

that religion was an inseparable part of the language, without which “Yiddish became just gibberish” (Seed 1976, 79).

The favorable attitude that Singer has towards the religious nature of Yiddish returns to his strong belief in origins. Of course, we do not know what he exactly means by origins; does he mean genetic origins or religious origins? Is it related to being from the same place of birth or to being antecedent in time? Despite these questions, one thing is certain: that Jews have always been proud of their origins and their deep roots in history.

The Jewish passion for roots is meaningless without the solidarity among Jews and support for other community members. Singer's view about origins becomes more intelligible when it comes to literature. According to him, originality defines the values of a literary work. In *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Singer says that a writer must have roots, and Marxists cannot be great writers, because they are against roots. All great literary works are unique, and a cosmopolitan thinker, namely, a Marxist, cannot be unique, because he has no roots in any nation nor belongs to any people (Singer 1985, 64). He goes on to say that a writer belongs to his background, his language, his history, his culture, and to his origin. He contends that literature is completely connected with the writer's origin; the greatness of such literary masters as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Gogol is a result of their rootedness in their people (Singer 1985, 61).

Singer himself, as a Jewish writer, is utterly absorbed in the Jewish community of Shtetls, since he grew up there. A great part of his stories take place in these small and mid-sized market towns in the immediate vicinity of Christians.

Writing about Shtetls and their people is the point where Singer could link his Jewish origins with Yiddish, since he wrote and published all of his works only in Yiddish, and then he personally supervised the English translations. In *A Young Man in Search of Love*, he explains his preference for Yiddish: “I knew enough Hebrew to attempt writing in that language but at that time few people spoke Hebrew. It lacked words used in day-to-day conversation” (Singer 1978, 7). In his stories, he writes about Jewish people and their culture living in the Shtetls. He represents the Yiddish world of the Shtetls. Both his fictional writings and his memoirs concern the Shtetls, their people, and their tradition. At times it becomes difficult to distinguish facts from fiction in his stories. The interweaving of facts and fiction puzzles the readers to the point that they wonder whether they are reading a piece of literary work or an account of historical facts. According to Singer’s biographer Janet Hadda, “The need to erase or deny his dual loss of family and community led Bashevis to develop the literary technique that became a hallmark of his writing. Throughout the rest of his career, he merged autobiographical facts and fiction so seamlessly that it was often impossible to tease the two apart” (Hadda 2003, 110).

Shtetls, for Singer, are a symbol of his identity, and he writes about them for an English-reading audience. In fact, after writing one or two stories in Poland, he immigrates to the United States in 1935. In the first few years in America, he does not write fiction. It is after an eight-year hiatus that he resumes writing fiction in 1943. He writes about a community that perished after World War II due to Shoah, i.e., Holocaust. According to Leonard Kriegel, although Yiddish was still spoken in a restricted use after the war, Yiddish literature was finished, except for a few talents who lived either in the United States or in Israel (Kriegel 2005, 333). But among them, only Singer could

become a representative of Yiddish literature and well known to the non-Yiddish world (334).

Law, Community, and Individuals

Singer's stories are not political or sociological, since he believes that sociology does not concern a single person or a few persons but rather concerns masses of people (Singer and Burgin 1985, 56). He chooses to write about individuals and their relationship to other members of the community; the individuals who live alone or in the families that must abide by God's Commandments in the Torah and in accordance with ancient Jewish laws and traditions for religious and social matters in the Talmud. Singer's folk tales concern such community people, their religion and folklore.

The Shtetl folk attend the Jewish holidays and practice their faith and "pay scrupulous allegiance to the externals of religious life, but they totally ignore its moral imperatives" (Hadda 2003, 123). Since Shtetls were market towns, the people there busied themselves with everyday life. What brought them together was the dominance of Jewish religion and laws or, as Sanford Pinsker says, the Torah/Talmud was a homogenizing force exerted on the people of the Shtetl (Pinsker 1969). The yoke of law was so firm that there remained a few options for people who displayed reluctance to accept it. Singer recreated a world in which the "deeds" are highlighted and the faithful are seen through their deeds (Pinsker 1969, 30). In other words, the Jews are regarded faithful and devoted to the communal law so long as they attend the prayers and holidays. Thus, the mere impractical faith would not render the individual Jews part of the community.

For law to be enforced, a complicated bureaucratic body is created and the rabbi, as the head of the court, enacts the law. In *Gimpel the Fool*, after Gimpel sees his wife Elka with another man in her bed, he says nothing and goes back to the bakery till the morning. The next day he goes to the rabbi to get advice on what he saw the night before. The rabbi tells him that he must divorce her at once and must not remain under the same roof with her any longer. Since Elka denies committing adultery and people take her side, the rabbi's verdict turns against Gimpel: "The verdict he gave was that I mustn't even cross her threshold-never again, as long as I should live" (Singer 1982, 9). At night when Gimpel goes to the bakery, he feels a strong desire for Elka and finds it difficult to be away from her. In the morning, he goes to the rabbi again to tell him that he has made a mistake and urge him to reconsider the case. "Nine months passed before all the rabbis could come to an agreement. Letters went back and forth. I hadn't realized that there could be so much erudition about a matter like this" (Singer 1982, 9).

But even after nine months, the rabbi is not convinced that Gimpel has made a mistake. However, thanks to an "obscure reference in Maimonides" (Singer 1982, 10), the rabbi agreed to overturn the verdict and allow Gimpel to go to his wife. If it was not for law, Gimpel could go to his wife so earlier than that, but since it was a religious law, he found it difficult to neglect it, even though he changed his mind later.

Law and the Devil

People's faith, in Singer's stories, is tested by the Devil. The yoke of law and tradition is at times so unbearable that the promise of a little freedom could be hugely tempting. The Devil tempts Singer's characters to free themselves of the constraints of law. In *A Crown of*

Feathers, Akhsa, the granddaughter of Reb Naftali and well-versed in Biblical knowledge, is tested by the Devil. Her grandfather, Reb Naftali, dies of shame after Akhsa rejects her suitor, Zemach, who is a yeshiva boy and a devout scholar. The Talmud scholars are highly respected in the community, and it would be an honor for a family to marry their daughter off to such scholars; this is why Reb Naftali chooses Zemach for his well-bred grandchild, but she does not sign the marriage contract. One day when she is searching in his grandfather's library, she finds a Bible which is a forbidden book, and some lines in it amaze her. She reads that Jesus is God's only son. She finds expressions in the New Testament such as "the resurrection of the dead" and "Kingdom of Heaven" (Singer 1982, 355) which the Torah does not mention. One night when Akhsa is sleeping, she hears a voice; it is the Devil in the guise of her grandmother that tells her, "Be it known that the Gentiles are right. Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. He was born of the Holy Spirit as prophesied. The rebellious Jews refused to accept the truth and therefore they are punished. The Messiah will not come to them because He is here already" (Singer 1982, 356).

After her conversion to Christianity, Akhsa marries a Gentile, but their marriage does not go well. She thinks that it is due to her disloyalty to the Jewish God. In fact, the crown of feathers which was braided by the Devil is the promise to freedom in the Kingdom of Heaven and being resurrected from the dead Jewish world. Finding the crown in an unexpected place like a pillow reassures Akhsa that it is a sign from the angels and from a loved one, and that is why the Devil disguised himself as her grandmother. Akhsa thinks that she has found the truth, but the Devil tells her "The truth is that there is no truth" (Singer 1982, 360). This sentence of the Devil comes to her

mind repeatedly until the very last minute of her life. She is lost forever and never finds the truth. As Singer himself says, truth exists, but it is like a crown of feathers. Akhsa sees the crown twice, but each time it disappears from her sight. Singer believes that if Akhsa found the truth, “this would create a whole revolution in everything” and would upset the balance between good and evil. That is why the crown of feathers vanishes, because to see the truth means to see God, and if He comes out of hiding, the Devil will not have a chance to exist any longer (Lee and Singer 1976, 158). Irving Buchen states that in Singer’s stories the Devil is explicit but God is unseen and silent. The Devil, disguised as a gentleman or a grandmother, gains control over the characters, but it happens nevertheless “only through human complicity and consent” (Buchen 1981, 24).

The Devil knows very well that Akhsa will be fascinated by the Bible and takes advantage of her sheer boredom with Jewish laws. When Akhsa reads the Bible for the first time, she discovers that Jesus is the Messiah. This is what she could not find in Jewish books. “All they promised was a good harvest for good deeds and starvation and plague for bad ones” (Singer 1982, 355). What she has found in Jewish books is obeying the laws which are written exclusively for the Jews. Before converting to Christianity, she felt the same as Matthew Arnold did: “Wandering between two worlds, one dead / the other powerless to be born” (Arnold n.d., lines 85-86). Having lived between the old and lifeless world of Jewish laws with a Jewish Messiah still to be born, she makes a resolution to find the truth in a new faith which already has a Messiah. In fact, she wants to find faith in her newly discovered truth, namely, Christianity. Akhsa, like Singer himself, is searching for a universal truth, a universal God that is for the whole humanity and not just the exclusively-owned God of Jews. Therefore, she leaves her small community and becomes a convert to

live in the realm of truth not the laws of her previous religion. When Akhsa cannot find the truth in Christianity either, her hopes completely shatter. Once again, she is wandering between two worlds, a world isolated from her Jewish people, and the world of absolute truth powerless to be born.

Law and Freedom

Singer's characters are perpetually susceptible to the touch of evil. They cannot be free by adopting a modern relativistic viewpoint. The truth, if attainable at all, is defined within the balancing forces of good and evil, rather than beyond these two. Alchonon in *Taibele and Her Demon* (Singer 1982) goes into Taibele's bedroom and tells her that he is Hurmizah, one of the Devils. Alchonon threatens her that if she does not let him in her bed, he will curse her. Taibele does not dare to sleep with someone else, because she is still a married woman despite the fact that her husband had left her. For the same reason, men also dare not take the risk seek her company. The superstitious Taibele consents to sleep with Alchonon—not the real Alchonon, but rather a Devil. The poor and isolated Alchonon needs to be with someone, and Taibele cannot bear living alone. Therefore, the Devil is made an excuse for unleashing their desires. Moreover, no law or ritual applies to the marriage to the Devil—no engagement contract, no wedding canopy, and no ring or fidelity. In effect, their unbounded freedom owes to the Devil, who undermines the Jewish law.

The enforcement of the law requires people with free will to accept responsibility for their deeds. Taibele ignores the fact that she is sleeping with Alchonon of her own free will. At first, she thinks that the Devil is forcing his way into her bed, and there is no escape from him, but then after some time she likes him and even longs for him.

She undermines her responsibility because she assumes that the Devil is taking away her free will, and the Devil's scheme becomes an excuse for Taibele to break the law with no shame. Nevertheless, afterwards she freely chooses the Devil when she is not afraid of him any longer. The Devil and free will become two closely linked entities so that in the absence of the Devil, free will would perish and vice versa. Singer believes that without the Devil the material world could not exist, and if we could see God, we would not have free choice anymore. It is our blindness to God's greatness that makes temptation and sin possible. Since God wants us to have free will, it means that the Devil must exist. If there is no Devil, there is no freedom to choose between good and evil (Lee and Singer 1976, 157). Taibele and Alchonon's law-free affair is a miniature version of what boys and girls in Frampol did at the ball organized by the Devil in the guise of a wealthy gentleman. The whole town is deluded by the Devil, and under his spell they enjoy the freedom that they will otherwise never have. For the Devil, deluding the whole community seems more rewarding than deluding an individual. As the literary critic Ben Siegel has proposed, "Satan's pride in seducing the best individuals does not compare to his joy at corrupting an entire community" (Siegel 1969, 20).

The Devil as the Narrator

In those of Singer's stories in which the narrator is the Devil and we read the story from his point of view, the assumption is that the Devil penetrates the thoughts that occur in the characters' unconscious. As Irving Buchen has proposed, psychology accepts that there is a deterministic force in humans, which is unseen and non-rational. For Freud, when unconscious desires become dominant in a human being, they weaken him and he cannot carry on with his regular life, and the result is psychosis. Correspondingly, Singer's reading of unconscious

is religious, and damnation is his characters' fate (Buchen 1966, 7). In *The Unseen*, the Devil-narrator is present throughout the story, tempting the good-natured Nathan into divorcing his infertile wife and marry his licentious servant. Nathan is a wealthy, law-abiding man and very friendly towards other townspeople. He seems to be aware of the law when he admits that his servant is a whore and remembers the stories of pious men tempted by she-demons. Nathan is aware that by divorcing his wife he would have to face legal and financial ramifications and therefore tries to suppress his lust for the young servant. But his resistance against the servant's temptations cannot take long, since the Devil has already taken control over his deep thoughts and can even decide what Nathan should see next: "I made more speeches, pious and impious, and at daybreak, when he fell asleep, I brought him Shifra Zirel, naked, and showed him the images of the children she would bear. ... In a back alley where I led him, he discovered a miserly scribe, who for five gulden, wrote the divorce papers and had them signed by witnesses, as required by law" (Singer 1982, 66-67).

Analogously, regarding the written law on divorce, the Devil attempts to convince Nathan of the divorce by referring to law itself and not by tempting him to transgress it. "Get divorce papers in Lublin and place them secretly in your wife's dresses; this will make the divorce valid. ... Only when you are far from home, and Shifra Zirel with you, you may inform Roise Temerl that she is a divorcee. In this way you will avoid scandal" (Singer 1982, 66).

The Devil goes into the details of law and is aware that neither he nor Nathan can change it, since law has entered the awareness of townspeople and they will not consent to transgress it and thereupon

bear the consequences. In other words, Nathan's awareness is the realm of law, which adjusts his behavior to the community's norms and which even the Devil does not bother to transgress. That is why the Devil's delusions work best in Nathan's deep, unseen desire for freedom, since law cannot function there. In psychological terms, it is Nathan's unconscious mind that sustains his desire to be free of the community law. In this case, Singer could be linked to Freud, since both of them believe in deeper desires affecting human beings' behavior. In Buchen's words, "How close Freud and Singer are can be rapidly indicated by an author whom both acknowledge as a master, Dostoevsky. Significantly, Dostoevsky referred to the unconscious as the 'Satanic depths'" (Buchen 1966, 8).

Isolation in Community

Singer's belief in freedom is part of his cosmic mind. Singer, like Dr. Fischelson in *The Spinoza of Market Street* lived in a small Jewish town, among people with everyday ordinary life. Both Singer and Fischelson enjoy reading the works of the Jewish-Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, whose pantheistic views on the world and religion has contributed to shaping their mind. Fischelson is a sick old man who lives alone in an attic room in Warsaw. He has a small telescope, which helps him to see beyond the homogenized community of Jews and their restrictions. He tries hard to be the Spinoza of his times—a man frowned upon by Jews because of his rationalist mind—hence, his self-inflicted isolation from the trivialities and vulgarities of life. "It comforted Dr. Fischelson to think that although he was only a weak, puny man, a changing mode of the absolutely infinite Substance, he was nevertheless a part of the cosmos, made of the same matter as the celestial bodies; to the extent that he was a part of the Godhead, he knew he could not be destroyed" (Singer 1982, 81).

He does not want to be destroyed and gone forever. His eagerness to be part of the infinite universe is due to his fear of death. Godhead, he believes, is where he can join the eternity and achieve immortality. In *A Young Man in Search of Love*, Singer writes, "The Godhead itself is a union of the principles of male and female, a yearning which can never be completely fulfilled" (Singer 1978, author's note). Fischelson is searching for a new universal truth other than the exclusive Jewish truth. Fischelson, unlike Akhsa, does not want to convert to a new religion in order to find the truth. However, both of them in their own way are seeking God, a unifying element which surpasses all religions but simultaneously unites them in the Godhead. Every time he looks at the stars and contemplates the vastness of the universe, he feels exalted and experiences "the highest perfection of the mind." He desires to be part of the infinite universe whose truth is not embodied by Jesus or the Savior. Whereas Akhsa's truth is bound to be religious, either Jewish or Christian and is to be discovered through a religion, Fischelson's truth directly focuses on God and yearns to be part of it.

Fischelson looks down at the market street and its hectic life with people shouting, laughing, buying and selling their goods, thugs fighting, and yeshiva boys studying the Torah at the Jewish study house, but he is contemptuous of all the irrational hubbub of that busy street. Even the street animals are ignorant, because, like the people, they do not listen to reason and act upon emotion. Fischelson chooses to live in his ivory tower to keep himself aloof from the crowd and even from the rabbi whose religious ideas undermines his intellectual independence. Fischelson is a heretic and comes into conflict with the rabbi. He particularly despises the modern Jew and all "isms" associated with that, namely, Zionism, socialism, and anarchism. He does not want to belong to any of such schools, because these schools

and what they preach are so narrow that they would hinder his attempts to be part of the universal design of creation. When Black Dobbe enters his life and marries him, Fischelson feels young again but at the expense of his inclinations and beliefs. A man who longed to be another Spinoza and reveled in being part of the cosmos and an iconoclast living in his ivory tower now finds himself in love with one of those people he has been contemptuous of. “The problem for Dr. Fischelson is that,” Samuel Mintz has proposed, “The life of the mind is no proof against the demand of the flesh. He cannot insulate his mind against the sounds ... of the world around him” (Mintz 1981, 77). Many of Singer’s characters are unwillingly isolated, but by contrast Fischelson gladly isolates himself from the community. After his wedding, he is back again to the earthly pleasures and regrets the fact that he cannot pursue his intellectual appetite: “Divine Spinoza, forgive me. I have become a fool” (Singer 1982, 93).

Community Law and Rumor

In townspeople’s reactions to Fischelson’s intellectualism, we can see a hostility to reason itself. The rabbi is the head of the community and his law is God’s law, and therefore his law could not be against reason. Thus, for the people of Singer’s stories, faith and reason and law are interrelated; faith means obeying Jewish law, and if people obey the law, it means that they are reasonable. People have to accept the law as they receive it, and too much reasoning is forbidden because it would make them rationalists who use their minds to question the religious law. Singer’s Spinozian characters use their reasons to express doubts about the Bible, the Talmud, and the prayers, which is not welcomed by the community. The revelatory insights of characters like Akhsa suffer the same fate, since their revelations go beyond Jewish law and Jewish reasoning. In his article *Bashevis Singer and the Jewish Pope*, Joseph Sherman explains it in

the context of Jewish culture: “Bashevis’s work consistently restates his view that although Revelation as the Torah defines it may be questionable, the moral absolutes of the Ten Commandments are not. By contrast, ‘the worship of reason [is] as idolatrous as bowing down to a graven image’” (Sherman 2001, 13).

We can trace the isolation of Singer’s protagonists in the light of the Jewish community’s fondness of the petty and mediocre. They love people who are like themselves and follow the hero who is ordinary and lives among them. In *Zeidlus the Pope*, the Devil tells Zeidel, “Their thirty-six saints are all shoemakers and water-carriers” (Singer 1982, 172). The townspeople want everyone to be looking down to the earth not up to the sky. The Devil continues, “Their rule is: The closer one is to dust, the nearer one is to God” (Singer 1982, 173). The omnipresence of law even in the minute details of people’s lives has made them thoroughly uniform and reluctant to change or take risks. They like the particular, not the universal, and therefore immediately react to any change in a person’s behavior, particularly those changes which tend to go beyond the particular life of the small town and its all-encompassing law.

People show such fear of change in many of Singer’s stories by spreading all kinds of rumors about the unruly characters. The use of rumors to shape the readers’ judgement on characters is very common in Singer’s stories. Many sentences begin with “It was rumored that” to tell the townspeople’s rumors and gossips about the protagonists who are verging on eerie behavior. Ralph Rosnow, a professor of psychology, defines rumor generation as “an attempt to make sense of change or novelty and what it portends for the future. This process extracts meaning from, and gives meaning to, the context in which it

is situated” (Rosnow, 1988, 14). Townspeople in Singer’s stories are uncertain about the individuals whose way of life is different from theirs. People strive to understand the danger signals by spreading rumors in order to maintain the order and meaning against the chaos. In Singer’s different stories, rumors have played a decisive role in isolating the unruly characters from the community. According to Robert Knapp (1944), “Rumor has the unique distinction of both expressing and at the same time forming public opinion. ... Somehow, the more a rumor is told, the greater is its plausibility” (Knapp 1944, 27). In the small Jewish community settings of Singer’s stories, privacy does not mean anything and people know everything about each other. In *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy*, we read: “In Bechev the people were not used to having mysteries stay mysteries for long. How can you keep secrets in a little town where everyone knows what's cooking in everyone else's pots? ... There were plenty of persons who made a practice of looking through keyholes and laying an ear to shutters” (Singer 1982, 167).

It is in such a context that fear grips the townspeople when they hear or see that a fellow Jew is behaving abnormally or is hiding something. The community strives to overcome the fear of chaos and uncertainty resulting from individuals’ deviant behavior by spreading rumors about them. People come up with all sorts of speculations about the protagonist and look at him or her suspiciously so that the individuals would be forced to return and obey the law or otherwise be isolated.

Conclusion

Finally, we can say that law and its force play a key role in shaping the mind and behavior of Singer’s characters and townspeople. His characters become isolated when they express a novel idea or act

differently in a community where the homogenizing force of Talmud and its commandments are exerted indiscriminately on all people. Moreover, attending Jewish prayers and holidays demand that men and women behave consonantly in spite of their individuality, and since secrets, heresies, and abnormal behaviors are revealed instantly in such a small community, they make a pretense to faith to remain among other Jews. Singer's protagonists choose to live differently from others, hence their isolation from their people. Their isolation is not in a way that the reader might feel sympathy for them in the end; rather, Singer has the readers watch the fate of the individuals who are lost forever in a world abandoned by God and filled with the Devil. The individuals in search of God, or a deeper meaning, or a way to transgress the law follow the Devil, who either disguises himself as a good-hearted person or possesses their mind. Yet in the end, the Devil does not give them what they have been looking for; rather, he leaves them alone and perplexed as they are isolated in a world that promises no ideal form of life and obstructs the discovery of the truth.

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