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Tension Between Reform and Orthodox Judaism in “Eli, the Fanatic”

KATIE GRANT

The relationship between fundamentalist Jewish sects and progressive Jewish sects is constantly evolving and is greatly influenced by location and historical context. The denominations differ in many critical ways including their levels of observance of Jewish traditions and holidays, their conceptions of Jewish religious literature such as The Torah and The Talmud, and their attitudes towards social movements. The latter is one difference that illustrates the most dramatic schism between the sects: the amount that the varying groups assimilate into modern cultural, social, and political practices. Philip Roth’s story, “Eli, The Fanatic,” illustrates how fundamentalist sects of Judaism and their rigid, inflexible beliefs and practices were directly at odds with adaptable progressive sects in post-Holocaust America. The story revolves around a community of progressive (Reform) Jews and its attempt to grapple with displaced fundamentalist (Orthodox) Jews from Germany. The story sheds light on the reasons why two sects of the same religion during this time period were divided, and not united.

Irreconcilable differences between strict, fundamentalist Jews and more flexible, progressive Jews

have caused interdenominational tension throughout history, but “Eli, The Fanatic” captures the specific struggles of the post-Holocaust era. The story presents devastating insight into the obstacles that Orthodox Jews from Germany faced upon immigrating to America to escape persecution in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the struggles that Reform sects faced upon accepting the exiles into their communities. The story exemplifies the challenges that Orthodox and Reform sects endure when they live in close proximity, and the social and political forces that can prevent the sects from living together amicably.

The story is set in the fictional town of Woodenton, New York, which is portrayed as a sheltered and comfortable community of progressive Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles). The group of progressive Jews who reside in the town, referred to simply as the Woodenton Jews, have managed to successfully blend in with the Gentiles until the balance is upset by the arrival of Orthodox Jews from Europe. Leo Tzuref is the leader of the Orthodox refugees and he immediately establishes a Yeshiva—a school for the displaced children to study sacred Jewish texts—on the outskirts of town. The presence of the Yeshiva provokes the progressive Jews, and they take immediate action against the fundamentalist Jews, pleading with them to shut down the institution and quietly assimilate into the existing customs of the community. Roth does not offer an explicit motive for the Reform Jews’ behavior and discrimination against the incoming Orthodox Jews, but a careful psychological and historical reading of the text produces likely explanations.

“Eli, The Fanatic” depicts the pressures felt by both Orthodox and Reform Jews to elevate and differentiate themselves from the opposing Jewish sect

in order to preserve their own values, lifestyles, and socioeconomic positions. The sects often attempt to develop a hierarchical system, out of fear that if the sects exist on the same plane in society the Gentile public will view all Jewish people as a united group. This legitimate fear that Gentiles might group all Jewish denominations under one umbrella category has different repercussions for Orthodox Jews than it has for Reform Jews. One crucial reason that Reform Jews do not want to be associated with Orthodox Jews is because they do not want to risk facing the persecution their Orthodox counterparts have suffered throughout history. The Holocaust impacted all sects of Judaism but Orthodox Jews were intensely targeted, which plays a major role in the backstory of “Eli, The Fanatic.”

Roth sets the story in 1948, only three years after the end of the Holocaust, at a time when the horrifying genocide was fresh in everyone’s memories. In these post-Holocaust years, the consequences of being Jewish were severe and tangible, and the Reform Jews in “Eli, The Fanatic” are undeniably aware of this. The reformed Woodenton Jews are incredibly fearful that the presence of Orthodox Jews in their community will bring attention to their own Jewishness and possibly lead to another genocide. Although this fear is not voiced outright by the Woodenton Jews, there are many moments when their post-Holocaust anxiety shows. During Eli’s conversation with his fellow townsman, Ted-Heller, Eli half-heartedly brings up the solution of converting the Orthodox Jews. Ted objects, stating, “The way things are now are fine—like human beings. There’s going to be no pogroms in Woodenton. Right? ‘Cause there’s no fanatics, no crazy people” (Roth 277). Ted’s response reveals his fear that the presence of the Orthodox sect will spark a genocide of Jews much clos-

er to his home than Europe. He also believes that the lack of “fanatics” in the Woodenton community is the main factor that has kept the Reform Jews safe. His reply also gives away his tremendous insecurity about his safety. He states, “There’s going to be no pogroms in Woodenton,” but then seeks affirmation of this statement from Eli.

Another instance in which the Reform Jews blame the Orthodox Jews for bringing the Holocaust on themselves is Eli’s statement that if the fundamentalists had “given up some of their more extreme practices,” they could have avoided the genocide (262). Eli adds that if the Orthodox Jews had toned down their religious devotion and blended in with the Gentiles of Europe, the “persecution of the Jewish people, of which you [Tzuref] and those 18 children have been victims, could not have been carried out with such success” (262). The Reform Jews equate radical Jewish practices and beliefs with harsher persecution, and, therefore, fear how the newly-arrived Orthodoxy in their community could impact their own reception from the Gentiles. The Woodenton Jews have sacrificed aspects of their religion and ethnicity to please the greater Gentile population, which has helped them avoid substantial persecution; they do not want their sacrifices to count for nothing if the Gentiles equate them with the newcomers. The Woodenton Jews are living in relative comfort, security, and protection from anti-Semitism, and they are physically and emotionally distanced from the suffering of European Jews. They are able to fear the consequences of being associated with European Orthodox Jews from their vantage point of comparably cushioned safety.

The Woodenton Jew’s separation and distance from the suffering experienced by Holocaust victims

also instills them with communal survivors' guilt. The progressive Jews recognize that their liberal ideologies and practices have helped them avoid persecution, but they also empathize with the plight of the victimized Jews. The guilt felt by the reformed Woodenton Jews leads them to push the Orthodox sufferers farther away, instead of embracing and comforting them. James Duban's important research on the effect of trans-Atlantic survivors' guilt in "Eli, The Fanatic" emphasizes the role of guilt in the actions and attitudes of the Woodenton Jews. In his piece "Arthur Koestler and Meyer Levin: The Trivial, The Tragic, and Rationalization Post Factum in Roth's 'Eli, The Fanatic,'" Duban asserts that the Orthodox Jews in Roth's story are the physical reminder to the Reform Jews that while *they* have escaped persecution and the Holocaust unscathed, their fellow Jews have not been so lucky at all and are in dire need of support.

With the Orthodox men and children living amongst them, the Woodenton Jews can no longer escape or run from the violence committed against members of their own religion. They cannot cope with the persecution by pretending it does not exist or sweep racial injustice under the rug. Eli accuses his wife of dealing with their marital and social problems in this manner, complaining that she "wasn't able to face the matter." He adds that "all she wanted were love and order in her private life... Let the world bat its brains out—in Woodenton there should be peace" (Roth 261). Miriam's desire to ignore issues by secluding herself in an unrealistic, sheltered world, is symbolic of the way the Reform Jews in Woodenton deal with the exiled Orthodox Jews.

Duban claims that the Woodenton Jews are desperate to rid their community of the Orthodox Jews

"for reasons beyond wishing to live harmoniously with their Protestant neighbors, to assuage the subconscious shame for their own survival and prosperity when confronted with corporeal evidence of a horror that has until then remained at convenient continental remove" (174). He explains that there are also connections and consistencies between the British White Paper Policy of 1939, which limited the number of Jewish immigrants allowed to enter Palestine, and the actions of the Woodenton Jews in "Eli, The Fanatic." The White Paper Policy was a response to Arab concerns about the increasing number of Jewish immigrants in Palestine and greatly affected Jewish displaced persons after the Holocaust (172). The White Paper policy discriminated against Jews, using legalism to hide racial prejudice; Duban argues that the Woodenton Jews similarly depend on the function of the law to further their own discrimination against the displaced Jewish immigrants (172). Hiding behind the law allows the Woodenton Reform Jews to push their own agenda of ridding their assimilated community of fundamentalist Jews without appearing prejudiced.

Duban's article draws from Arthur Koestler's book *Promise and Fulfilment—Palestine 1917-1949*, and he is particularly interested in Koestler's spin on psychosomatic legalism. Psychosomatic is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "Of, relating to, or designating a physical disorder caused or aggravated by psychological factors" ("psychosomatic"). Koestler, however, views the White Paper Policy as psychosomatic because it was formulated primarily out of British racism against Jews. Koestler "appropriates the term to trace debilitating foreign policy to either bias or overt bigotry" (Duban 176). Duban delves into the connections between the psychosomatic function of the

Policy and the actions of the Woodenton Jews, also taking Meyer Levin's autobiography *In Search* into account:

Koestler, for instance, maintains that White Paper protocol was a "pseudo-Machiavellian policy, concocted from emotional prejudice" (127). In *In Search* Levin appeals to concur about British opposition to Zionism: "At the bottom of the equation there was always a gap. It could only be filled by the old, old factor: there were too many of them who didn't like Jews" (470). Roth, in turn, seems similarly minded about the psychosomatic foundations of British foreign policy. (Duban 181)

The Woodenton Jews attempt to use trivial laws to banish the Holocaust survivors from their community, using legalism as a cover-up for racism. The White Paper Policy and the actions of the Woodenton Jews are also alike in the way that the Policy had devastating consequences for large populations of persecuted Jews, and the actions of the Woodenton Jews would have had the same effect on the Orthodox Jews had Eli not transformed in the end of the story.

Overwhelming survivor's guilt or not, the Woodenton Jews do not empathize with the suffering of the European Jews enough to wish to be associated with them by the Gentile public. Their fear of the persecution associated with Orthodox sects is not the only reason that Reform Jews in "Eli, The Fanatic" do not want to be lumped with them in Gentile perception. The Reform Jews also fear the loss of their recently achieved social status in their affluent New York community. Eli mentions to Tzoref in a letter that "it is only since the war [World War II] that Jews have

been able to buy property here, and for Jews to live beside each other in amity" (Roth 262). The Reform Jews revel in their new-found property rights alongside well-to-do Gentiles, and are terrified that the extreme religious beliefs and practices of the displaced Orthodox Jews will reverse their recent political and social gains. Hana Wirth-Nesher states that "as Woodenton has only recently admitted Jews to its manicured lawns and split-level homes, the American-born Jews fear that the presence of caftaned refugees will jeopardize their hard-won affluence and grudging acceptance by Protestant neighbors" (104). The Woodenton Jews' pride in their property ownership relates to their pride in living the ideal suburban lifestyle.

The Orthodox Jews represent urban dangers to the Reform Jews which is evident in Artie Berg's comment to Eli: "Eli, in Woodenton, a Yeshivah! If I want to live in Brownsville, Eli, I'll live in Brownsville" (Roth 255). Brownsville is one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York, so Artie's reference to Brownsville implies that he equates the fundamentalist, radical sects of Judaism with danger and inner-city life. Pre-transformation Eli also adopts this stereotype, writing to Tzoref that "Woodenton is a progressive suburban community whose members, both Jewish and Gentile, are anxious that their families live in comfort, beauty, and serenity" (261). Comfort, beauty, and serenity are qualities that both Artie and Eli associate with rural, or suburban lifestyles; both men insinuate that the Orthodox Jews will endanger these elements of their current life with their supposed urban ties.

Suburban lifestyles are also often synonymous with upper class and affluence, and it is obvious in "Eli, The Fanatic" that the Woodenton Jews recognize the

class difference between themselves and the displaced fundamentalist Jews. Instead of showing compassion for the struggles that the European Jews endured and recognizing the causes of their poverty, the Woodenton Jews look down with condescension upon the destitute Orthodox Jews. The Woodenton townsmen complain to Eli that the displaced Jews do not pay taxes and are therefore a burden to the society (Roth 249). Throughout the story, the darkness of the residence of the Orthodox Jews is contrasted with the bright lights of the Reform Jews' residences, highlighting the lack of electricity and other privileges of the displaced Jews. At one point during his second visit to Tzoref, Eli asks Tzoref for a little light in the room. Tzoref then "lit what tallow was left in the holders," before Eli wonders if Tzoref and his family cannot afford electricity (265). Whether the Orthodox Jews prefer to live without modern utilities or cannot afford them does not seem to bother any of the Woodenton Jews besides Eli; the other Reform Jews judge their outdated lifestyle without needing to make any distinction between preference and necessity. The Woodenton Jews constantly refer to the time period and the importance of keeping up with 20th-century advances, without worrying whether the Orthodox Jews cannot afford a modern, 20th-century lifestyle. The townspeople consider their antiquated lifestyle a purposeful affront to the times, and they want it to be perfectly clear to the Gentiles that they are themselves progressive American citizens. In an article about the evolution of American Judaism, scholar David Gerber asserts that Reform Jews often "remain loyal to the understanding that the practice of faith must remain responsive to progressive changes in values and practices in the larger American community" (77). The Woodenton Jews fit right into this assessment, because

they consider it possible to mix Judaism with progressive societal values and traditions.

Reform Jews also do not want to be associated with what they believe to be the radical ideologies of the Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jews strictly observe the laws of The Torah, believing the Torah to have been revealed directly to Moses by God. They also heavily emphasize the rabbinical commentaries within The Talmud ("Traditional"). Reform Jews, on the other hand, advocate for progressive revelation and are not bound as strictly to the exact doctrine of conduct set forth in the Torah (Meyer). In an entry on Reform Judaism from *World Religions*, Michael Meyer states, "Reform Jews hold that revelation is ongoing with the progress of human knowledge and religious sensitivity. The freedom of the individual Jew to be selective, to draw from Jewish tradition those elements of belief and practice that he or she finds the most personally meaningful, is far greater among Reform Jews than among either Orthodox or Conservative." This adaptability helps the progressive Jews in "Eli, The Fanatic" blend in and live peacefully amongst the Gentiles.

Reform Jews also do not adhere to Orthodox standards such as the strict dress code, the gender regulations for relationships between males and females, or the multilingual requirements of fundamentalist studies ("Traditional"). In fact, many Reform Jews may view Orthodox Jews as radical extremists in the same way that many Gentiles do. This is illustrated in "Eli, The Fanatic" when Ted Heller tells Eli that he is growing skeptical of the "hocus-pocus abracadabra stuff," and accuses the Orthodox Jews of having "all these superstitions" (Roth 277). He criticizes the Orthodox sect for preaching against science; he references the Old Testament story of The Binding of Isaac, or Genesis 22, to

prove the Orthodox Jews capable of violence and sacrificial rituals.

While there are many reasons that Reform sects do not want to be associated or grouped together with Orthodox sects, including their fear of persecution, their hard-earned social standing, and their more liberal ideologies, there are also reasons why Orthodox sects do not want to be united in public perception with Reform sects. Orthodox Jews feel that Reform Jews are too concerned with assimilating with Gentiles and are not true to the foundational principles of Judaism. David Gerber states that while Reform Jews “have invited the world in, sought to learn new ways from its example, and in the process become Americanized, Orthodox Jews have proceeded tentatively outward into the world, struggling as their primary obligation to remain true to fundamentalist and traditionalist conceptions of Jewish law and custom” (78). In “Eli, The Fanatic,” Ted Heller perfectly represents how some Reform Jews have distanced themselves from religious aspects of Judaism. He confesses to Eli, “Look, I don’t even know about this Sunday school business. Sundays I drive my oldest kid all the way to Scarsdale to learn Bible stories... And you know what she comes up with? This Abraham in the Bible was going to kill his own *kid* for a sacrifice. She gets nightmares from it, for God’s sake! You call that a religion?” (Roth 277). His exclamation shows his removal from fundamentalist aspects of Judaism on many levels.

Unless Roth embellished this passage to make the implications of Ted’s allusion more clear, any person of Jewish faith, regardless of sect, is likely to be familiar with Genesis 22. The fact that Ted refers to Abraham, the patriarchal father of Judaism, as “this Abraham in the Bible,” and also *how* he explains the events of

the story to Eli, shows just how removed he is from his own religion. Orthodox Jews would undoubtedly be appalled at Ted Heller’s lack of knowledge and respect for Abraham’s predicament, and refuse to be associated with Jews with so little understanding of basic tenants of Judaism. In discussing competing sects of Judaism in America, David Gerber argues that many Orthodox Jews consider Reform Jews “incomprehensible, heretical, and no longer real Jews,” based on the Reform Movement’s emphasis on fitting Judaism into the modern, American lifestyle with disregard for long-standing Jewish traditions (75). Hana Wirth-Nesher adds to the conversation with her comment: “Tzuref and his crew are simply too Jewish when viewed through the eyes of the Gentiles whom they [the Woodenton Jews] are fanatic about pleasing, and appeasing. For them, religiously observant Jews are the ‘other’ ” (111). Ted Heller and his commentary perfectly exemplify this progressive perspective.

Along with the religious reasons that cause many Orthodox Jews to disassociate themselves from Reform sects, there are also ethical reasons. Literary scholar Aimee Pozorski focuses on Ted Heller’s allusion to the Akedah story in Genesis, and reads “Eli, The Fanatic” through a biblical lens. In her article “Akedah, The Holocaust, and the Limits of the Law in Roth’s “‘Eli, the Fanatic’,” Pozorski asserts that the dilemma that Abraham faces, when he is forced to choose between obeying God’s command and obeying his paternal instincts, is similar to the predicament Eli faces in Roth’s story. Abraham ultimately chooses to follow God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac instead of following his heart, and he is rewarded for this decision at the last minute when God stops him from committing filicide. Pozorski argues that Eli is forced to choose

between following the laws of his community and following his moral compass. She emphasizes the way in which the laws of Woodenton are at odds with moral and ethical responsibilities to fellow humans, especially children. She states, “[Eli] has been called to defend the community members who want to see the children go away, but his visceral response suggests that he should be on the other side of the law protecting the children from the community’s laws rather than protecting the community from the children who have been displaced in their lives already” (Pozorski). This internal debate leads to Eli’s dramatic transformation and embrace of Orthodoxy at the conclusion of the story.

If the Akedah story is used as a lens through which to view “Eli, The Fanatic,” then it becomes obvious that Abraham and Eli come to different conclusions about which decision they feel comfortable making. Abraham decides to side with the law of God, while Eli eventually decides to side with his heart. Eli’s divergence from the framework of The Binding of Isaac portrays Roth’s own ideas about the inability of the law to protect persecuted Jews (Pozorski). Pozorski claims that “Eli, The Fanatic” shows that the law is “merely a performance of language. It is not essentially true or good. It can dispossess as easily as it can empower” (4). The implications of Eli’s choice to side with his morals over the law are even more profound considering Eli’s profession as a lawyer: he finally realizes that laws are mostly arbitrary and do not always benefit, or take into consideration, underprivileged minorities.

There are other instances in “Eli, The Fanatic” when the Orthodox Jews show their disgust with the laws that the Reform Jews insist on enforcing. During Eli’s first visit to the residence of the displaced Jews, he has a riddled conversation with Tzoref, fraught with

multiple meanings and complex connotations. When Eli justifies his use of the law to displace the Holocaust survivors, he states that he did not create the laws and that they are there to protect the community. Tzoref replies, “The law is the law,” by which he means that the Jewish laws set in place in The Torah are the only true laws. Misinterpreting, Eli answers, “Exactly!” (Roth 251). This breakdown in communication stems from the different values placed on religious law by the Orthodox and Reform sects of Judaism. The Reform Jews honor man-made laws, while Orthodox Jews consider Mosaic laws (the laws set in place by Moses in the Old Testament) to be the only real code of conduct.

In a second conversation about the law, Tzoref gets so frustrated with Eli that he exclaims, “Stop with the law! You have the word suffer. Then try it. It’s a little thing” (Roth 265). Here, Tzoref highlights the disconnect between arbitrary secular laws and compassion. He later adds that “what you [Eli] call law, I call shame. The heart, Mr. Peck, the heart is the law! God!” (266). Roth illustrates that Orthodox Jews refuse to comply with hurtful, secular laws that conflict with religious laws or compassion to fellow human beings. Wirth-Nesher adds: “From Tzoref’s point of view, the boundary that divides Jews from the non-Jewish world supersedes the boundaries within the Jewish world, and he expects to be treated compassionately by those he defines as part of his own group” (111). Tzoref refuses to act in accordance with secular laws he does not agree with or believe in.

“Eli, The Fanatic” exposes many reasons that Reform and Orthodox sects of Judaism wish to be disassociated from one another in Gentile perception, and the story also illustrates a variety of methods that the sects use to achieve this separation. One specific way

in which Reform Jews elevate and distance themselves from Orthodox Jews is by modifying their practices and beliefs to shift closer to the Gentile norm. In order to evaluate the impact that the Gentiles have on Reform Jews, it is important to notice the invisible but persistent Gentile presence in “Eli, The Fanatic.” The story does not feature any non-Jewish characters, but it would be easy to mistake the Woodenton Jews as Gentiles. They take the place of the Gentiles in the way that they persecute a sect of Judaism, which is interesting because their actions are based, in part, out of fear of the type of persecution they themselves have faced. The hierarchy of persecution starts with the Gentiles persecuting Reform Jews, and leads to Reform Jews persecuting Orthodox Jews.

The invisible Gentiles are often mentioned in Eli’s letters to Tzuref. In one letter Eli writes that “for this adjustment to be made [Jews and Gentiles living in amity], both Jews and Gentiles alike have had to give up some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other” (Roth 262). Eli is exemplifying many Reform Jews’ opinions that some compromises to Jewish practices, traditions, and appearances must be made in order to peacefully live in America amongst the non-Jewish population. Another reference to the Gentiles of Woodenton is made by Ted Heller when he says to Eli, “Pal, there’s a good healthy relationship in this town because it’s modern Jews and Protestants” (277). The key word in his statement is *modern* Jews, implying that fundamentalist Jews refuse to compromise with Gentiles, and therefore cannot live in affluent communities such as Woodenton. The Woodenton Reform Jews want to make it very clear that they are willing to sacrifice the more non-conventional elements of Judaism in exchange for a middle- or

upper-class life in safe, secluded communities.

Along with their willingness to conform to many conventional American norms, the Reform Jews in Woodenton move closer to the Gentiles by adopting an us-versus-them stance. When Eli and the Reform Jews refer to their community, they purposely exclude the European Jews; they refer to themselves as inside the community and the displaced Jews as outside of it. During their discussion of the effectiveness of the law, Eli tells Tzuref that “*we* [emphasis added] make the law, Mr. Tzuref. It is *our* community” (266). Since Tzuref does not agree with the laws, Eli’s use of plural pronouns excludes the Orthodox Jews from the sense of belonging within the community. Tzuref calls Eli’s attention to this when he asks Eli where he personally stands on the laws he is enforcing, and Eli responds that he is acting on behalf of his townspeople. Eli says, “I am them, they are me, Mr. Tzuref,” to which Tzuref responds with frustration, “Aach! You are us, we are you!” (265). Tzuref attempts to teach Eli that Reform and Orthodox Jews are all united under Judaism, and should act with respect and compassion, but Eli refuses to internalize Tzuref’s “Talmudic wisdom” (267).

The Woodenton Jews elevate themselves above the European Jews by acting in solidarity and sharing biases. Eli spends so much energy sheltering himself and the townspeople from the influence of the displaced Jews that he is shocked to learn that displaced Jews have been watching the townspeople from a distance. Eli finds out that Tzuref’s assistant has knowledge of his wife and other townspeople and he asks, “He talks about *us* to *you*?” Tzuref cleverly replies, “You talk about us, to her?” (268). The watched become the watchers in this instance, which Eli finds incredibly unsettling. His insulation against the Orthodox Jews failed to keep the

sects completely separated. Eli begins to appreciate that even if his condition that “the religious, educational, and social activities of the Yeshivah of Woodenton will be confined to the Yeshivah grounds” is met (262), the Reform and Orthodox sects cannot function with the perspective of outsiders versus insiders.

On the other hand, the Orthodox Jews distance themselves from the Reform Jews by maintaining the fundamentalist elements of their religion that seem most foreign to the Gentiles, and refusing to assimilate into normative American culture. One of the main and most important ways that the Orthodox Jews distinguish themselves is by their dress code and attire. The Woodenton Jews are incensed by the attire that Tzuref’s assistant wears into town: a long black coat and a black Talmudic hat. The assistant also sports a long, soft beard. Tzuref wears a traditional Jewish yarmulke, which Eli mistakenly assumes to be a missing part of his head in the dim light of the old residence.

The dress code that the displaced Jews embrace in “Eli, The Fanatic” follows the attire outlined in an encyclopedic entry on Traditional Orthodox Jews. The entry states, “The men wear a black suit and white shirt and sometimes also a black coat. Both Modern- and Traditional-Orthodox men wear a flat, round skullcap called a yarmulke at all times once they reach the age of 13, removing it only when swimming or showering” (“Traditional”). The entry also remarks on facial hair regulations for Orthodox Jews: “The men also have full beards because the Halakah [Jewish Law from The Torah and Talmud] prohibits shaving.” While the Orthodox Jews remain loyal to these strict dress codes, the Reform Jews have abandoned these attire restrictions entirely. This is evident by Eli’s confusion at seeing Tzuref’s yarmulke and the townspeople’s offense at the

old-fashioned attire worn by the assistant around town. After addressing the causes for tension between Reform and Orthodox sects of Judaism and outlining a few ways in which the sects distinguish themselves, it is important to note that strain often exists without direct animosity or confrontation between the denominations. This is the case in the world of “Eli, The Fanatic,” because the sects have no reason to be wary of each other aside from powerful sociopolitical forces and pressures. The displaced Jews are not doing anything intrinsically illegal; they are simply housing 18 children and two men in a single mansion on the outskirts of the town, and learning and teaching Jewish law. They are not disruptive to the lives of the Woodenton community, yet the Reform Jews feel threatened enough by their mere presence to attempt to force them out. Eli originally charges the displaced Jews with violating local zoning laws, but later in the story Ted Heller states, “But this is a matter of zoning, isn’t it? Isn’t that what we discovered? You don’t abide by the ordinance, you go” (Roth 276). Ted’s hesitant phrasing insinuates that the townspeople desperately searched for a law that would allow them to run the Orthodox Jews out of their town.

Their fear and prejudice against the European Jews, then, had nothing to do with any specific misbehavior or events. The Woodenton Jews feel threatened without legitimate causation; they are acting instinctually to protect themselves socially and politically. This explains why the Woodenton Jews are not satisfied when Eli successfully convinces the assistant to change his attire: Ted says, “Look, Eli, he changes. Okay? All right? But they’re still up there, aren’t they? *That* doesn’t change” (276). The Woodenton Jews centered their dissatisfaction with the newcomers on their traditional Jewish attire, but this is simply an excuse to

cover-up the fact that they are operating psychosomatically.

In conclusion, little effort is made by the Reform Jews to connect with the Orthodox Jews in “Eli, The Fanatic,” because the Reform Jews understand that empathy has the potential to make them vulnerable. If they allow themselves to fully appreciate the hardships endured by the Holocaust survivors and allow them to stay in Woodenton, they risk facing persecution or the loss of their recent socioeconomic gains. The guilt that the Woodenton Jews feel about surviving the Holocaust unscathed while the European Jews did not forces them to push the displaced immigrants away to clear their consciences, instead of embracing them. The Reform sects do not want the Gentile populace to unite them with the radical ideologies of the Orthodox sects, and the Orthodox sects condemn the assimilation and religious compromise adopted by Reform sects. The Reform Jews distinguish themselves from Orthodoxy by shifting closer to Gentile norms, while the Orthodox Jews do so by shifting farther away from the norms. The tension experienced between different sects of Jewry is often caused by undercurrents of social, political, and economic pressures, which hinders positive interdenominational relationships within Judaism.

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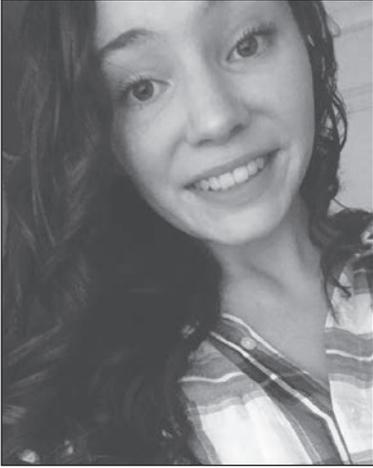
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About the Author



Katie Grant is a graduating senior majoring in English. This paper was completed as a final Senior Seminar project in the Spring Semester of 2016. It was written under the mentorship of Dr. Kimberly Davis (English). Katie hopes to

stay in Massachusetts and work in publishing and editing after graduating in May of 2017.