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'Ilui': Depiction of the Jewish Genius in Select Works of American-Jewish Fiction

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Abstract:

This paper is an exploration of the depiction of genius (or 'ilui') through the lens of Jewish culture in Abram Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Chaim Potok's *My Name Is Asher Lev*. It also traces the theories behind the frequent incidence of genius among the Jewish people and discusses how their propensity for accepting suffering creates a unique blend of humour and fatalism in the 'ilui'. Genius may be found not only in the writers of these works and their protagonists but also the other characters, influences and symbols. It deals with the traumas faced by these geniuses as well as their personal response to the conflict between individual calling and community conformity. The selection of these specific texts represents three different kinds of genius-the child genius or prodigy Asher Lev, the multiply talented or polymath Herzog; and the commercial genius David Levinsky who also represents the phenomenal economic success of the Jews as a community.

Keywords: Jewish American Fiction, genius, Cahan, Bellow, Potok.

“In his youth, he earned the name “ilui”, genius, a term not lightly bestowed by the Jews...”- Asher Lev, *My Name is Asher Lev*, pg 10-11

“Many people feel that they are in possession of a great gift when they are young. But one does not always give in to a gift. One does with a life what is precious not only to one's own self but to one's own people. That is the way our people live...”- The Mashpia

The Jewish People represent one-fifth of one percent of the human race. They are one of many small groups of people with their own culture, language and homeland. One would expect that they should hardly be heard of but this is obviously far from the case. Jews are at the center of every creative, cultural, philosophical, political and scientific, movement and endeavor. Jews are amply represented as Nobel Prize recipients, winning at least 20% of all awards given to date. They founded Hollywood, and are today the major influence in popular culture in America and elsewhere. Jews dominate every imaginable profession.

It is important to not confuse a 'genius' with a 'free-thinker'. While Neil Klugman and Eli Peck of *Goodbye Columbus* begin their journey towards self-liberation, they are far from geniuses. Genius comes from the Arabic word *jinn* which means *spirit*. A genius is a person with distinguished mental ability which can manifest as foremost intellect, or outstanding creative talent(s) or both. The IQ of a genius is defined as 140 or above. Geniuses are often as insensitive to the limitations of mediocrity as they may be very sensitive to themselves. The term prodigy denotes the presence of genius in childhood. The term polymath denotes the presence of multiple talents in one person. While Asher Lev is an example of the former, Herzog may be seen as an example of the latter for in *Herzog*, the mouthpiece of the author Saul Bellow- a "hybrid genius" as M. F. Schulz calls him- showing that he is familiar with Yiddish, French, Italian, Latin, and many other languages, and is also familiar with many cultures as diverse as Turkish, Japanese, and, of course, American. Most major concepts are also defined in *Herzog*: morality, philosophy, psychology, self, religion, faith, death, and marriage, among others.

A theory by Howard Gardner in his 1983 book *Frames of Mind* states there are seven kinds of intelligences, each with its own type of genius. In Abram Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Chaim Potok's *My Name Is Asher Lev* we find real genius- not only in the writers of the works and their protagonists but also the other characters, influences and symbols. These texts read as the psychological biographies of three very different kinds of geniuses- one a Talmud scholar turned financial wizard, the other an eccentric man of letters, the third an avant-garde painter. However different their external characteristics/circumstances, they are united in their existential loneliness, continuous inner conflict, dangerously close to insanity in a hostile environment. Moreover, Asher and his mentor and Herzog unite in their disdain of the commercialization and commoditization of talent.

"We mustn't forget how quickly the visions of genius become the canned goods of the intellectuals...the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook, the chap mental stimulants of Alienation...I can't accept this foolish dreariness."-Herzog, *Herzog*.

David Levinsky however is the other extreme who gives his genius expression through commercialization. This is why while Herzog and Asher are at peace with their choice and respect themselves, David remains caught in the quagmire of doubt, constantly fantasizing about what might have been had he used his genius in the academic field instead of cheapening it to buy the 'American Dream'.

"Modigliani, Pascin, and Soutine/ Worked in ochres and ultramarine// Soutine lived in strife/ Pascin took his life/ And Modigliani used drugs for cuisine//"-*My Name is Asher Lev*

Geniuses are often accused of lacking common sense. A genius's intense focus on a given subject might appear obsessive/compulsive as seen in the cases of Asher Lev who simply can't stop drawing and his mentor and Herzog who needs to keep writing letters, but it might also simply be a choice made by the individual. If one is performing groundbreaking work in one's field, maintaining other elements of life might logically be relegated to insignificance. This is why the above mentioned characters seem determined to destroy themselves and that which is precious to them. While Herzog is the absent-minded professor, Asher is a high-maintenance child, similar to a "special needs" child. They both destroy their 'happy family' while David refuses to make one. The single greatest adjustment problem of the gifted is the tendency to become isolated from others. As they do not share other's interests, vocabulary, or desire to organize activities, the genius may withdraw. The gifted are not likely to fall victims to positive suggestion but many develop negativism i.e. rebellion to a conspicuous degree. So we find David Levinsky deviating from the norms of society by remaining a childless bachelor and defying the ethics of fair business to win the money-making game. Herzog rebels from what is considered normal behavior to work out his personal problems. But it is young Asher Lev whose rebellion is the most overt. Like Ozzie from Philip Roth's *The Conversion of the Jews* he chooses to identify with Christian symbols, thereby insulting and subsequently alienating himself from the Landover community. "Your painting. It's taken us to Jesus... Painting is for the goyim, Asher. Jews don't draw and paint"- Aryeh Lev, *My Name is Asher Lev*. It is important to note that social and economic factors can prevent expression of genius. Such factors include societal expectations and repression within and/or of a community. While the characters under discussion overcome these odds, references are made in *My Name is Asher Lev* by the Mashpia to gifted Jews who sacrificed personal ambition to serve their community. It is this largely unspoken expectation at a time when Russian Jews were suffering in the years after World War II that ultimately forces Asher to choose between genius and Judaism and it is his controversial choice of the former that eventually excommunicates him.

Immanuel Kant defines genius as the innate ability to grasp and formulate concepts independent of any instruction. David Levinsky for instance is shown assimilating the American way of life, especially 'high class' etiquettes by his knack of observation and imitation. He studies the latest sociological theories and also learns the ropes of the cloak-making & marketing business purely through observation. Herzog works out the meaning of life by himself and apparently even manages to find a way out of his "insanity". Asher Lev learns to draw and learns the nuances of painting and the technique of using different mediums such as oil-colors without any formal instruction till his teenage years.

But the Jewish genius is a learnt rather than innate quality. From 800 B.C. through the first millennium of the Common Era, we have only two examples of great Jewish

accomplishment. The first is the concept of monotheism expressed through the Hebrew Bible. This laid the foundation for three great religions and also, as described by Thomas Cahill in *The Gifts of the Jews* (1998), formulated a way of looking at the significance and meaning of life according to what we today recognize as the modern sensibility. The second achievement is Christian theology expressed through the New Testament, an accomplishment that spilled into every aspect of Western civilization. But Jews do not appear in the annals of philosophy, drama, visual art, mathematics, or the natural sciences during the eighteen centuries from the time of Homer through the first millennium C.E. It is unclear to what extent this reflects a lack of activity or the lack of a record. That period however boasts of the most famous Jewish philosopher of medieval times, Maimonides (1135–1204). From 1200 to 1800, only two Jews, Spinoza and Montaigne distinguished themselves. The scant depiction and presence of Jews during the European Renaissance is explained by the fact that they were excluded by the religious restrictions on the occupations they could enter on the one hand and social discrimination on the other. Then came legal emancipation, beginning in the late 1700's and with it one of the most extraordinary stories of any ethnic group at any point in human history.

Today, Jews have been found to have an unusually high mean IQ of 110. They are average on the subtests measuring visual-spatial skills, but extremely high on subtests that measure verbal and reasoning skills. Two potential explanations for this are obvious: winnowing by persecution (only the smartest Jews either survived or remained Jews) and marrying for brains (scholars and children of scholars were socially desirable spouses). “A man should sell all he possesses in order to marry the daughter of a scholar, as well as to marry his daughter to a scholar,” advises the Talmud (Pesahim 49a). The combination is potent: by marrying the children of scholars to the children of successful merchants, Jews were in effect joining those selected for abstract reasoning ability with those selected for practical intelligence.

Another key factor explaining elevated Jewish intelligence is can be occupational selection. Jews were in most places and at most times restricted to occupations involving sales, finance, and trade—all of which required high levels of intelligence and specialization. On the other hand, the chief occupation of non-Jews, farming did not exact any such demands. Moreover, the devotion to religion among the Jewish community and the high levels of respect accorded to Rabbis encouraged worship of God through prayer and study. All Jewish males had to become proficient in their religious texts if they were to properly practice their faith—and read both in private and aloud in the presence of others. The Torah and the Hebrew prayer book are far from being simple texts and the memorization has enabled generations of Jews to sharpen their cognitive faculties.

“the highest mathematics taught in the Gentile universities were child’s play as compared to the Talmud”- David, *The Rise of David Levinsky*.

In short, during the centuries after Rome's destruction of the Temple, Judaism evolved in such a way that to be a good Jew meant that a man had to be smart. In Abram Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Book 1 offers the reader an intimate glimpse into the world of Talmudic learning where talent is currency.

From the time of Moses, Jews were commanded by God to heed the law, which meant they had to learn the law which was so extensive and complicated that this process of learning and reviewing was never complete. Moreover, Jewish males were not free to pretend that they had learned the law, for fathers were commanded to teach the law to their children. It became obvious to all when fathers failed in their duty. No other religion made so many intellectual demands upon the whole body of its believers. But it is not only the religious learning that leads to the birth of a genius. Morris Bober of Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* is, for instance, what may be called a moral genius for a man who can bring about the conversion of a delinquent gentile from his grave is nothing short of a genius. He may lack the IQ for material success but has an abundance of EQ (emotional intelligence). However this theory cannot be explored at length in this paper because there is no textual evidence to distinguish 'moral genius' from simple goodness and the concept of EQ remains open to controversy.

In *The Evolution of Man and Society* (1969), the geneticist Cyril Darlington presented the thesis that Jews and Judaism were decisively shaped by the Babylonian captivity that began with the fall of Jerusalem to the forces of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E. We read that Nebuchadnezzar "carried into exile all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans. . . Only the poorest people of the land were left" (2 Kings 24:10). By the time the exiles returned, more than a century later, many of those remaining behind in Judah had been absorbed into other religions. Following Ezra's command to "separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives" (Ezra 10:9), only those who renounced their foreign wives and children were permitted to stay within the group. The returned exiles, which formed the bulk of the reconstituted Jewish community, comprised mainly the descendants of the Jewish elites. In Roth's novella *Goodbye Columbus*, Brenda's family is a family of over-achievers if not geniuses. In the short story *The Conversion of the Jews*, Ozzie is has the raw genius of a new-age prophet who has the courage to question existing religious dogmas in the footsteps of the Jewish prophet Moses.

The suffering of the Jewish genius makes him a schlemiel figure. Jewish culture is featured by its paradoxical vision, which is best exemplified by Jewish people's ethnic identity as God's chosen people. On one hand, the Jews regard themselves as members of the Chosen people, hence superior to other nations; on the other, they are actually exiled, subjugated and prosecuted, a minority precariously surviving within the larger Christian culture. Theology helps to create psychology. The awareness of the dualities of their

destiny leads to a believer and even a non-believer to an ironic, skeptical view of life—pride integrating with bitterness, uncertainty with affirmation and optimism with pessimism. The paradoxical attribute of Jewish culture is so noticeable that it is not strange that the renowned theologian, Abraham J. Hershel, has penetratingly remarked, “dualities are at the core of Judaism”. The vision of life’s uncertainty, mysteries and doubts finds its appropriate expression in the techniques in literature. Jewish humor came to be used as a way of bridging the gap between their spiritual aspirations and their actual material situation. Traditionally, Jewish humor is stark, edged, and cynical. It communicates the double view of the man who is supposedly superior to the common run of humanity because he has been chosen, but finds in actuality that he has really been singled out for extra knocks on the head, dealt by those to whom he is presumably superior. Consequently, Jewish humor mocks, sneers at human foibles and pretensions, and delivers ironic observations about itself and its practitioners, the chosen people.

The unwanted marriage of circumstances and belief also gave birth to the folk figure of the schlemiel, a traditional hard-luck character of Yiddish folklore. Hence one can see that both Jewish humor and schlemiel figure are indebted to Jewish outlook on life, functioning as the literary expression of Jewish national consciousness. Jewish national consciousness of dualities of life exerts its influence on American-Jewish writers, who hold their Jewish background as creative fountain. Max F. Schultz in *Radical Sophistication* claims that American-Jewish writers are “radical sophisticated” --- they “balance between drop out or falsify, either to opt for absolution of a personal decision or to claim the ultimate harmony of contraries”.

There is thus a strong sense of fatalism in the Jewish genius, be it unconscious as in the case of Herzog or conscious as in the cases of David Levinsky and Asher Lev, and suffering for a greater cause. They may be schooled in the highest of disciplines, akin to Herzog, received a crash course in the school of life similar to David Levinsky or have been complete novices with innate understanding of their craft in the tradition of Asher Lev who is warned that “such gifts are from the master of the universe. But they have to be used wisely...”- The Rabbi, *My Name is Asher Lev*. The time has come for the Jewish geniuses to break free of the restriction that their genius must be expressed only in ways that are acceptable to the orthodox community and religion; and express their pain and that of their ancestors and their people. At the same time, the attempt to be accepted by their community and religion in their endeavors is equally important, for they have much to be proud of and if they abandon Jewish way of life they do themselves, their children, and the world a disservice. Both history and anti-Semitism make it easy to understand the reasons for the reluctance of Jews to develop their gifts, let alone talk about themselves. But Jewish accomplishment constitutes a fascinating and important area of study from both artistic and scientific perspectives.

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